

激突の OBSTACLEシリーズ クセンナハト

川上 稔

イラスト／さとやす (TENKY)

協力／剣 康之

III



Gekitotsu no Hexennacht - Volume 03

Εν ἀρχῇ-ἡν-ο ἰ-λόγος,
καὶ ὁ λόγος ἡν πρὸς τὸν θεόν,
καὶ θεὸς-ἡν-ο ἰ-λόγος.



OBSTACLEシリーズ

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デザイン：渡辺宏一（2725 Inc）

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激突の OBSTACLEシリーズ クセンナハト

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Ⅲ



『約束の布石』

「マーマ、花壇の世話が終わらないんだけど、どうしよう」

少女の問いに、母は応じた。

「ええ、フルール、そういうときはですね？——業者を呼ぶんです」

「ダイレクトだよマーマ！ 花は世話によって綺麗に咲くんだよ!」

「そんな一介の親子が手掛けるより業者に任せた方が世話も丁寧でムラが無いに決まってるじゃないですかフルール。もつとよく考えましょう」

母の言葉に、娘は花壇の中に鍬を立てて思案した。

……もつとよく考えるってことは——。

「あ、そうか！ 業者よりも私達の方が長い時間ずっと花壇にいられるから、マメに世話をしたいこうってことだね!」

「いえ、単に花を育成させるための術式があるから、ソレを使えばいいだけで。ええ、魔女なんですすもフルールも。私今は何もしませんけどね」

「マーマ！ 何か全体的に投げっぱなしだよ!」

「いいんですフルール。私は昔、この母体となる学校で花壇の世話をずっとやっていましたからね。ええ。酒飲んで倒れ込む馬鹿とか必殺技を御披露しようとか言って空間切断で植えたばかりのチューリップの苗を五百ほど異空間に落としてみたりとか、そういうの相手に日夜花壇を守ってきたことに比べれば、今のここは何で安全なことでしょうか」

「マーマ、実は花壇嫌い?」

「フルール、貴女は花が好きですね？ でも、寄ってくる害虫は好きですか?」

「ワオ！ じゃあマーマ、そういう害虫を叩きつぶしてたんだね!」



母は、頷かなかった。彼女はやや西日の空を見上げ、

「フルール、私は花壇も好きですが、お酒とクリームのたらく載った御菓子も好きなんです」

「……マーマ、つまり負けたの!」

「いいえ、勝ちました。私の食欲は私の制御下にありましたから。ええ、好きにさせました」

「マーマ、前向き思考だよ!」

まあいいです、と母は言った。

「私の名前の花は、手折られも撃ち抜かれも裁断もされずにここに来ますからね。スリズイエ」という名前が言いくかかったのが加護になりましたか。《桜》だったら駄目ですね」

「マーマ、私の名前がフルールなのも、やっぱりソレ?」

「あら、《花》という名前が良かったですか？ 花子とか御花さんとか呼ばれそうですけど」

「それだと満とか万って名前は悲劇だね……。でも、どっちかっていうと、花の名前が定かだった方が良かったかな、って思うの」

それもいいですね、と母は否定しない。だけど、

「貴女の名前の中には、私のことも含まれるんですよ、フルール。そして私だって、スリズイエだけではないのです」

「マーマは、他の花でもあるの?」

「ええ、だから大事に、花を咲かせなさいフルール。それが解った時、二つのことが解りますよ」

それは、

「一つは、私達が常に貴女の傍にいると言うこと。もう一つは、——花を育てる最高の術式は、花は一人でも咲くものだと思えないことです。いいですね?」

ハートを破壊された

魔法少女は

敗北となる……！

川上稔

イラスト/さとしやす(TENKY)
協力/剣康之

OBSTACLE・ハートブレイク

ハートブレイク
の
大
激
戦



フルール・S

学年：特待科三年
術式：欧州ドルイド系を基礎とする
所属：四法印学院
戦種フレイム：花巫女
使役体：？？？
デバイス：植銀ゼファイール

特徴：特待科三年ではあるが、小柄で細身であるため、二年生、下手すると一年生に見られることもある彼女だが、その実力は各方面において学院史上最高のものを持っている。だって親がアレだし使う術式もアレだしー、みたいなあー。ただ本人は、やはり偏り有る生活を送ってきたのだから。植物を愛でるのが好きなのだが、それが行きすぎて学食では草を食っているところを見かけない。そうであるならば肉食カラテカであるエルシー・ハンターのように肉ばかり食っている筈だが、そうでもない。では何を食っているのかというと、パンや米をメインとした食事で、好物はアンチョビピザとか、いや待て、麦も米も植物だぞ。ひょっとして形が解らなければいいなら、特機科が日々徹夜を乗り切るために作った健康緑汁飲むか？ ああ？———すいません、ちょっと理不尽だったので気が立ちました。そうですよ、ひょっとしたらアンチョビ主食で小麦粉がオカズとか、そんなことあったまるか。話もズレてきたのでお開きにしたいと思います。

「ママの言うとおりにしてれば、負けることは無いんだよ……!」



リスベス・ルエーガー

学年：とっくに卒業
術式：黒魔術
所属：U.A.H.
戦種フレイム：黒魔女
使役体：上級光霊
デバイス：双剣ドラグーン

特徴：魔女はいつでもお年頃、目下の問題は欧州U.A.H.代表にして三賢者の一人である彼女のことを何と呼ぶが良いのだろうか、ということである。リスベス閣下というのが向こうっぽいけど、四法印学院はU.A.H.ではないし、他組織に所属する魔女も多いので、そういう呼称は全体に通じません。リスベス様、というの、何か上下決まってしまうようでアレですし、ええ、何かもう、役職持ちの年上って、存在自体が面倒くさいですよ。というか何でもするか、眼帯つきの黒魔女三刀流とか、貴女何歳でソレですか、ついでにいうとオオササと呼ばれりすると地球上の何処にいても本人ツッコミが来るそうです。ハハアとか言うといきなり後ろに立つとか、ヤダ、三賢者、器が小さい……でも十年前、そんな人達はこの世界は守られたつてか、半壊程度で済んだ訳ですから、この世界の器もその程度だつてごときかもしれません。あ、ちなみに「姐御」って言ったら貴女見るような凄い顔されましたし、あ何て呼ぶべきなんだ……! 「リスベスさん!」 そんなおききたりなアブローチで満足できる魔女なの君は! よしじゃあタメ口で「おいリスベス」行かー? 行っちゃるかー? (ごまごまの文責:四法印学院広報委員対外班)

「随分と、暗い話と根回しに詳しくなったものだ」



一体何を
「ちよつと、
笑ってますの……!?!」



四法印学院術式科制服

術式科について

- 位置 正門入って右
- 校舎 屋上からしか入れない
- 特徴 薬学、術式開発に優れる



-rear-

術式科



●由来

術式科の制服も、その基礎部分においては普通科と変わりありません。胸上を渡る折り目に装飾と色がついたくらいでしょうか。ただ、これまでの普通科と特機科が合わせの色については単色だったのが、術式科では緑とオレンジという二色になっています。よく見ると足のタイツ側面の紋章もオレンジなので、身体の末端に通じる箇所に色変更が加えられていることになります。コレはということか、緑一色が普通科であったことを考えれば解ります。つまり緑は防護系、オレンジは力を外に出す、つまり術式科向けの加工ということです。ええ、そんな防護制服でドッカンドッカンやる生徒会長が如何に偉大か逆説的に証明できてしまいましたね。

さて、気を落とさずに行くと、ガワの大きな特徴はマントです。これは古代の魔女が隠者や放浪者であったことに由来しますが、民俗系の術式は、マントを隠れ蓑や広大な天幕や翼に変えたり、終いにはスクリーンや倉庫にもしたりと、意外にコレを多用する訳でして。特機科のようなケープ程度では済まないという、デザイン担当のリスベス氏によるそんな判断があったものです。ただ、これを長く大きくしたので、加護だ何だで予算を食って、小物類の付属が出来ないのは残念でした。

※モデルはメアリー・スーさんに御願いたしました。

Εν αρχῇ-ην-ο λόγος,
καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν,
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OBSTACLEシリーズ

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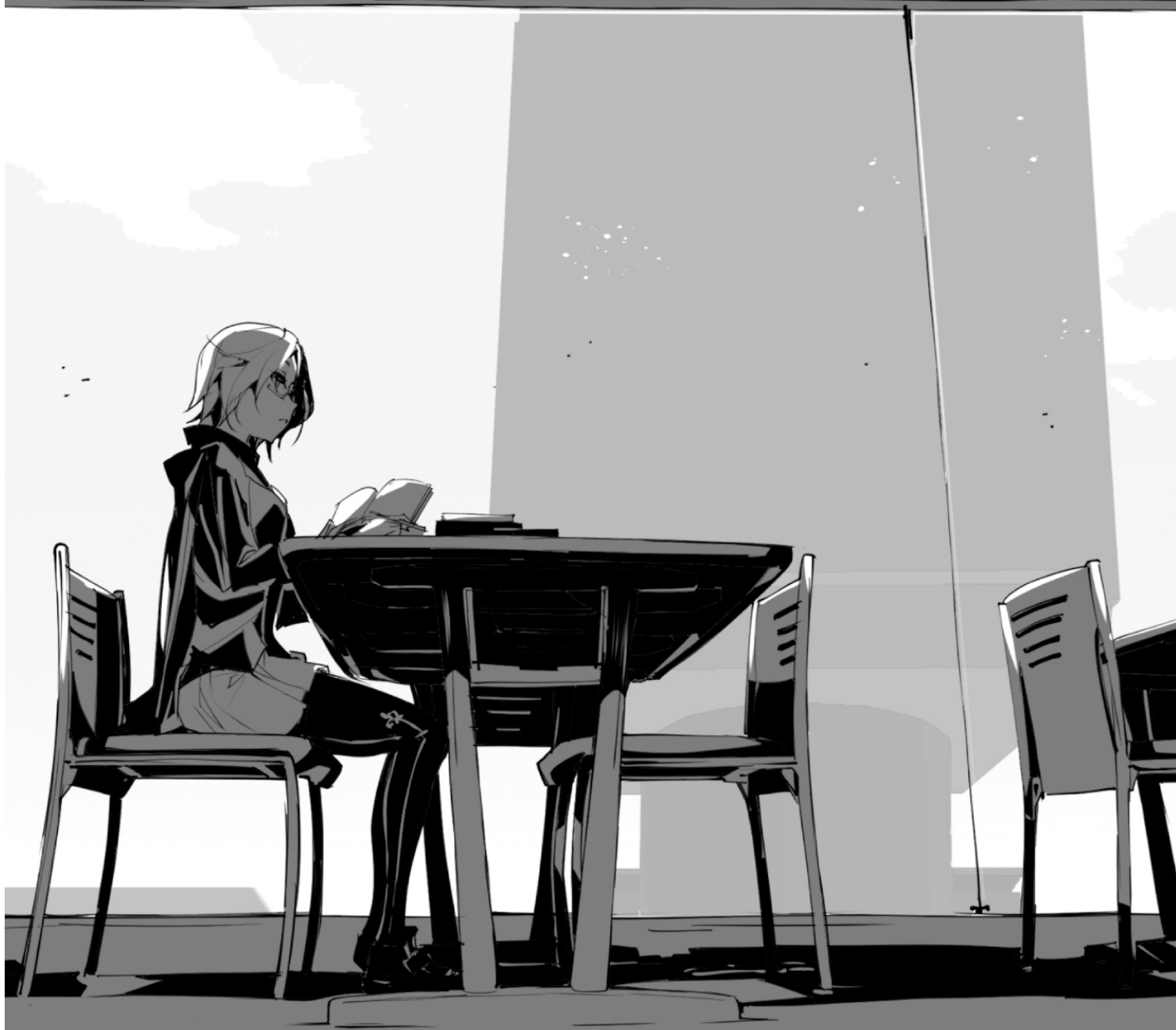
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デザイン：渡辺宏一（2725 Inc）

Prologue

“Place of Waiting”



No matter how distant they are
Their coordinates will coincide
Like the long hand and short hand

設定資料集

——一部だよ！

——というわけで今回もヘクセンナハト開始前における、自分の手による資料関係とかデザインとかいろいろ開示。
イメージの補完になれば幸いです。(イラスト・解説：川上稔)

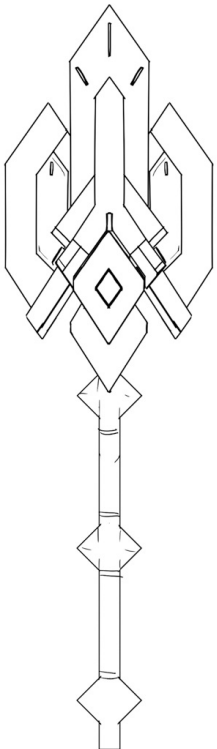
【フルール】



『フルール私服』

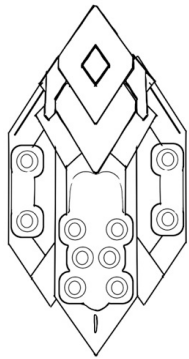
フルールの私服は、結構御嬢様デザイン。花がモチーフとなるので、フリルを配置したり。半袖なのは花壇などに立つことが多いので、長袖だと花に触れる動作の邪魔や、外からそういう光景を見たときの違和感になるかな、という感覚です。
彼女も描く人によってキャラのイメージが変わりやすいですねー。

【フルール デバイス… 槍鋏ゼフィール】



『砲撃時(側面)』

鋏形状になったときは、槍穂先部分が180度前に回った上で、柄の基部が90度下に回ります。ちょっと面倒な変形ですが、折りたたみ式のボールペンなどに似た構造がありますね。



『砲撃時(側面)』

砲撃時の刃を上から見た状態。三つ葉が重なってます。通常時に見えていた穂先の裏面にあたる部分ですが、砲撃時はそれが上を向く訳ですね。この三つ葉は開いて、砲門からの攻撃を左右に広げます。

『通常時』

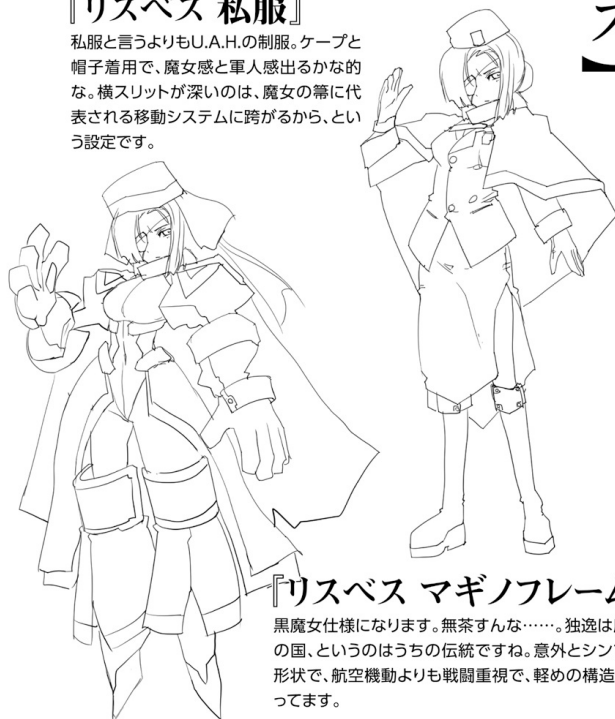
鋏形のデバイスですが、実は刃の部分を立てて槍状に出来ます。元々、母親の使用していたデバイスがベースデザインにあり、彼女は近接時にはこちらを使っていました。しかしフルールは小柄で槍が不得手だったので、鋏形でほぼ固定しています。

【リスベス】

U.A.H.の代表ですが、欧州主体のU.A.H.は政治側の権限が強く、彼女が全体の統括を行っている訳ではありません。また、米国や日本からだと“欧州U.A.H.”ですが、向こうからしてみると日本と米国が勝手に独自の動きをしているだけなので、自分達は“U.A.H.”とか、結構面倒です。素性としては元三賢者。ツール系に見えますが、単に喋るのが面倒系。堀之内やフルール達には、それなりの付き合いを保ってきました。尚、名前のリスベスは、ドイツ方面でのエリザベスの読み方です。結構な貴族系の御嬢様なんですね。元、とつきますが。

『リスベス 私服』

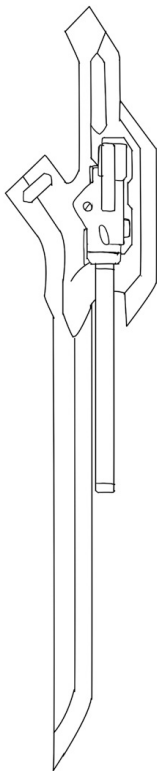
私服と言うよりもU.A.H.の制服。ケープと帽子着用で、魔女感と軍人感出るかな的な。横スリットが深いのは、魔女の帯に代表される移動システムに跨がるから、という設定です。



『リスベス マギノフレーム』

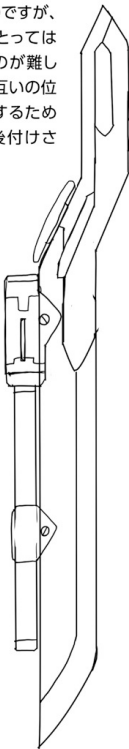
黒魔女仕様になります。無茶すんな……。独逸は魔女の国、というのはうちの伝統ですね。意外とシンプル形状で、航空機動よりも戦闘重視で、軽めの構造となっています。

【リスベス デバイス… 竜騎兵】



【一般兵用デバイス】

多量に出てきた、どっちゃっていうとピーキー設定のマジノデバイス。リスベスのものを量産型に落とし込んだもので、砲塔は上に乗せてあります。リスベスが試験しているときは問題なかったのですが、一般の魔女にとっては連携など取るのが難しかったので、お互いの位置などを感知するためにレドームを後付けされました。



下が剣先です。基本は両手持ちですが、二刀となったときは上か後ろのグリップを瞬間的に持ち替えて扱います。空間切断がある程度の飛び道具なため、元々は刃だけの構造でしたが、堀之内の母達と切磋琢磨する中で、砲塔を後付けしています。なので砲塔部分だけ、とってつけた感があります。

Preface

Title Page

ハートを破壊された

魔法少女は

敗北となる……！

川上稔

イラスト/さとしやす(TENKY)
協力/剣康之

OBSTACLE・ハートブレイク

ハートブレイク
敗北の
魔法少女は

The magical girl whose heart is broken will lose!

Groundwork of a Promise



『約束の布石』

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少女の問いに、母は応じた。

「ええ、フルール、そういうときはですね？——業者を呼ぶんです」

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「そんな一介の親子が手掛けるより業者に任せた方が世話も丁寧でムラが無いに決まってるじゃありませんかフルール。もつとよく考えましょう」

母の言葉に、娘は花壇の中に鍬を立てて思案した。

……もつとよく考えるってことは——。

「あ、そうか！業者よりも私達の方が長い時間ずっと花壇にいられるから、マメに世話をしたいこうってことだよな！」

「いえ、単に花を育成させるための術式があるから、ソレを使えばいいだけで。ええ、魔女なんですよ私もフルールも。私今は何もしませんがね」

「マーマ！何か全体的に投げっぱなしだよ！」

「いいんですフルール。私は昔、この母体となる学校で花壇の世話をずっとやっていましたからね。ええ。酒飲んで倒れ込む馬鹿とか必殺技を御披露しようとか言つて空間切断で植えたばかりのチューリップの苗を五百ほど異空間に落としてみたりとか、そういうの相手に日夜花壇を守ってきたことに比べれば、今のここは何で安全なことでしょうか」

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「いいえ、勝ちました。私の食欲は私の制御下にありましたから。ええ、好きにさせました」

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「マーマ、私の名前がフルールなのも、やっぱりソレ？」

「あら、花」という名前が良かったですか？花子とか御花さんとか呼ばれそうですけど」

「それだと満とか万つて名前は悲劇だね……。でも、どつちかっていうと、花の名前が定かだつた方が良かったかな、って思うの」

それもいいですね、と母は否定しない。だけど、

「貴女の名前の中には、私のことも含まれるんですよ、フルール。そして私だつて、スリズイエだけではないのです」

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「ええ、だから大事に、花を咲かせなさいフルール。それが解つた時、二つのことが解りますよ」

それは、
「一つは、私達が常に貴女の傍に在ると言うこと。もう一つは、——花を育てる最高の術式は、花は一人でも咲くものだと思えないことです。いいですね？」

“Mama, I’m not going to finish tending to the flowers. What should I do?”

The girl’s mother answered her question.

“Well, Fleur, when that happens...you need to call a florist.”

“You sure are direct, mama! But it’s the care you show the flowers that make them pretty!”

“Yes, but the care of a florist has got to be more thorough and consistent than that of a mother and her daughter, don’t you think, Fleur? You need to think these things through.”

Hearing that, the daughter stuck her hoe in the flower bed and thought.

...What does thinking this through mean?

“Oh, I get it! We can stay in the flower garden longer than a florist, so we need to look after the buds!”

“No, we have spells for growing flowers, so we just have to use those. We are witches after all, Fleur. Not that I’m going to do anything.”

“Mama! I feel like you’re leaving all the work to me!”

“I’m allowed to do that, Fleur. I spent a long time taking care of the flowers back at the school that became this one. Everything is so much safer now, compared to when I had to protect the flowers night and day from idiots who drank too much and passed out or idiots who would announce they were revealing a new special attack, slice through space itself, and send around five hundred newly-planted tulips into another dimension.”

“Mama, do you actually hate flowers?”

“Fleur, you like flowers, don’t you? But do you like the bugs they attract?”

“Wow! Then are you saying you crushed those bugs!?”

The mother did not nod. She simply looked up to the sun that was beginning to sink into the west.

“Fleur, I love flowers, but I also love alcohol and sweets with plenty of cream on top.”

“...Are you saying you lost, mama?”

“No, I won. Because my hunger was under my control. Yes, I used it to my heart’s content.”

“Talk about positive thinking, mama!”

“Well, whatever,” said the mother. “The flower I am named after comes here without being picked, pierced, or sliced. Perhaps how difficult Cerisier is to pronounce gave me a divine protection. Sakura probably wouldn’t have been enough.”

“Mama, is that why my name is Fleur?”

“Oh? Would you have preferred Hana? I get the feeling you would have been

called Hanako or Ohana-san.”

“Using that line of reasoning, being named Mitsuru or Man would be a real tragedy... But if I had to choose, I think I would have preferred a name with Hana directly in it.”

“That would have been nice.”

Her mother did not deny it. But...

“I am included in your name, Fleur. And I am more than just Cerisier.”

“Are you some other flower too, mama?”

“Yes. So treat those flowers with care so they will blossom, Fleur. Once you understand that, you will understand two more things.”

Which were...

“First, we are always with you. And second...the greatest spell for growing a flower is to never forget that flowers can bloom on their own. Okay?”

Character Page



Fleur S

Year: Honors Division Year 3

Spell Type: Based on the European Druid Style Affiliation: Shihouin Academy

Combat Frame: Flower Shrine Maiden

Servant: ???

Device: Spear Hoe Zephyr

Traits: She is in the third year of the Honors Division, but she is so short and skinny that she appears to be in the second or even first year. However, certain aspects of her skill are the greatest in the academy's history. I mean, think about who her mother is and what spell she uses.

But she seems to have lived a strange life. She loves flowers, but she takes it so far that no one has ever seen her eating plants in the dining hall. You might think that makes her an exclusive meat eater like that karate user Elsie Hunter, but that is not the case. Then what does she eat? Primarily bread and rice and her favorite food is anchovy pizza. But wait. Wheat and rice are both plants. If it's

fine as long as she can't tell what it originally was, would she drink the green health shake that the Special Equipment Division uses to get through their all-nighters? Well? Hm!? ...Sorry, that was so unreasonable I lost my cool for a second. Yes, I'm not going to let her say the anchovies are the main dish and the flour is only the side dish. And I'm getting off topic, so I think I'll end this here.

“If I do what Mama tells me, I can’t lose!”

Character Page 2



Lisbeth Lueger

Year: Long Since Graduated

Spell Type: Black Magic

Affiliation: U.A.H.

Combat Frame: Black Witch

Servant: Higher Light Spirit

Device: Twin Sword Dragoon

Traits: Witches are eternal teenagers. The current problem is what to call this member of the Three Sages who is now the representative of European U.A.H. Lady Lisbeth is probably what they call her there, but Shihouin Academy is not U.A.H. and a lot of our witches belong to other organizations, so it wouldn't work for everyone. Mistress Lisbeth seems to establish a hierarchy and is a little...y'know. Older officers are just a pain in general.

And what is this anyway? An eyepatch-wearing black witch who uses two swords? How old does she think she is? And if you call her middle-aged, she apparently shows up to correct you no matter where you are on the planet. Call her an old lady and she suddenly appears behind you. What is with the Three Sages? How petty are they? But it is thanks to those people's protection that the world was only partially destroyed ten years ago, so maybe that says something about the world as a whole. Oh, and if you call her "big sister" she looks at you like you're absolute scum. Then what are we supposed to call you!? "Miss Lisbeth"? Is a witch like you really satisfied with something so normal!? Then are we supposed to just casually say 'Hey, Lisbeth'? Really?

(The previous text came from the external affairs team of Shihouin Academy's PR Committee.)

"I have become very familiar with dark topics and groundwork."

Costumes Page



“Wait, why are you smiling...!?”

Uniform Page



四法印学院術式科制服

術式科について

- 位置 正門入って右
- 校舎 屋上からしか入れない
- 特徴 薬学、術式開発に優れる



-rear-

術式科



●由来

術式科の制服も、その基礎部分においては普通科と変わりありません。胸上を渡る折り目に装飾と色がついたくらいでしょうか。ただ、これまでの普通科と特機科が合わせの色については単色だったのが、術式科では緑とオレンジという二色になっています。よく見ると足のタイツ側面の紋章もオレンジなので、身体の末端に通じる箇所に色変更が加えられていることになります。コレはということか、緑一色が普通科であったことを考えれば解ります。つまり緑は防護系、オレンジは力を外に出す、つまり術式科向けの加工ということです。ええ、そんな防護制服でドッカンドッカンやる生徒会長が如何に偉大か逆説的に証明できてしまいましたね。

さて、気を落とさずに行くと、ガワの大きな特徴はマントです。これは古代の魔女が隠者や放浪者であったことに由来しますが、民俗系の術式は、マントを隠れ蓑や広大な天幕や翼に変えたり、終いにはスクリーンや倉庫にもしたりと、意外にコレを多用する訳でして。特機科のようなケープ程度では済まないという、デザイン担当のリスベス氏によるそんな判断があったものです。ただ、これを長く大きくしたので、加護だ何だで予算を食って、小物類の付属が出来ないのは残念でした。

※モデルはメアリー・スーさんに御願いたしました。

Shihouin Academy Spell Division Uniform

About the Spell Division

Location: To the right from the main entrance School Building: Entrance is on the roof
Special Traits: Excellent at potion and spell development

Origin: The Spell Division uniform has the same basic parts as the General Division one. The only differences are the coloring and the decorations on the fold above the chest. But while the General Division and Special Equipment Division had a single color for the shirt, the Spell Division has two colors: green and orange. A closer look shows an orange school emblem on the side of the leg tights, so the color has been changed on all the extremities. You can tell why this was done by noting that the General Division was solid green. Green is defensive while orange directs their power outwards, which is perfect for the Spell Division. Yes, this proves just how tremendously paradoxical our Student Council President is for blasting everything in a defensive uniform.

Now, to keep going before I depress myself, the most notable trait is the cloak. It has its origins in the ancient witches who were hermits or wanderers, but the Spell Division uses a lot of folklore and can turn the cloak into an invisibility cloak, a large tent, wings, or even a screen or storehouse, so it has a surprisingly broad range of uses. That may have been what its designer, Miss Lisbeth, meant when she said it would be more than the Special Equipment Division's mere cape. But by increasing its length and size, it eats through your divine protections and the weak unfortunately cannot use it.

- We asked May Sue to model the uniform.

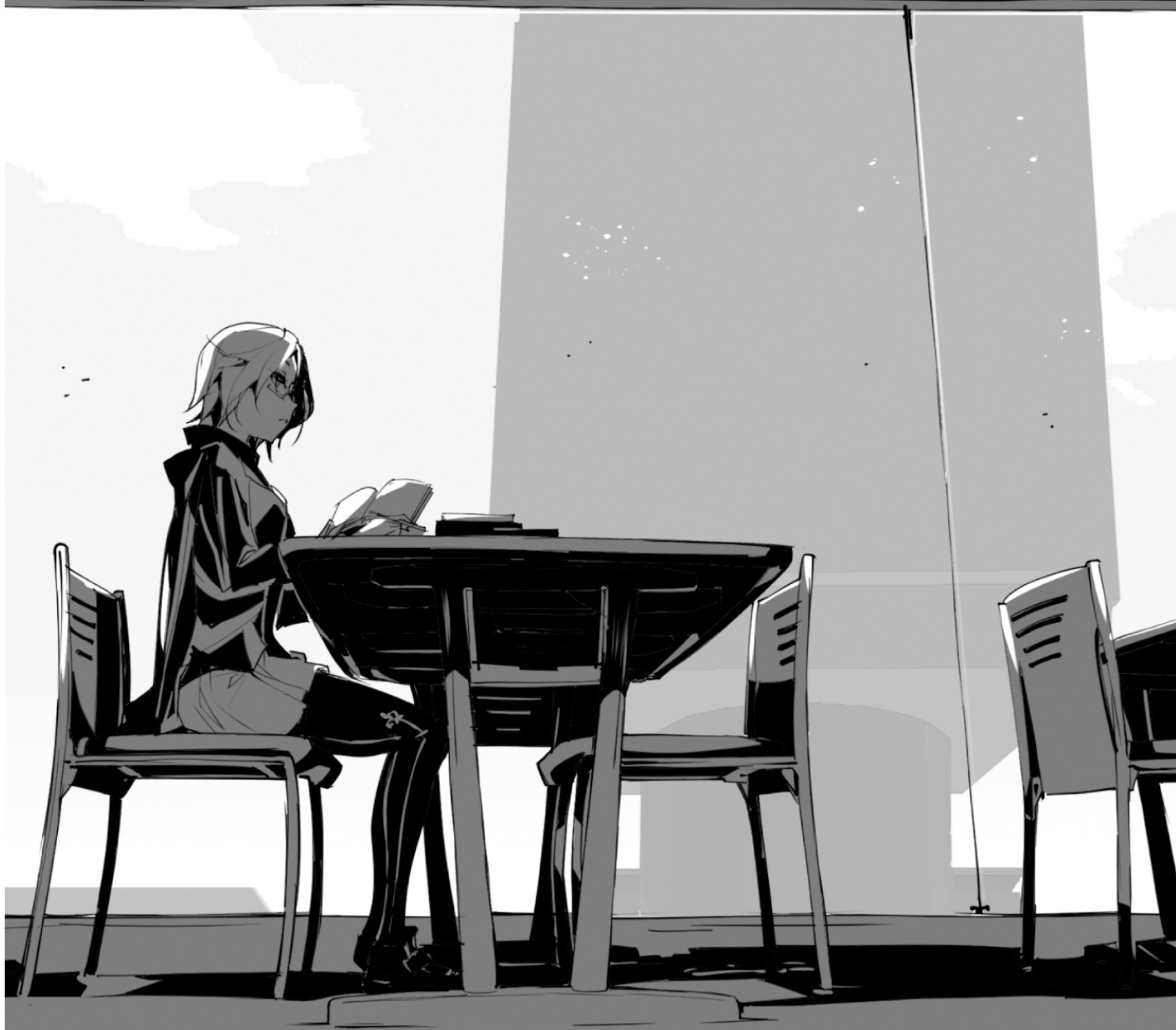
Spell Division

Fortune is not on the side of the faint-hearted —Sophocles of Athens

Prologue: Place of Waiting

Prologue

“Place of Waiting”



No matter how distant they are
Their coordinates will coincide
Like the long hand and short hand

No matter how distant they are

Their coordinates will coincide

Like the long hand and short hand

At Shihouin Academy, the second term midterms were beginning.

When Hunter stepped into the dining hall at lunchtime, it was relatively uncrowded.

Everyone was holding exam strategy meetings in the classrooms. The dining hall was located away from all of the divisions, so there was no reason to hold their meetings there. The only people there had already resigned themselves to their fate or had confidence in their success.

Hunter fell into the latter category. After all...

“The upper Rankers are exempt from the exams.”

Being an upper Ranker sure is great, thought Hunter.

Even after dropping a Rank, she was still in the single digits. She could generally choose not to take the exams, which meant her other records came into focus. All that really meant was she had to have a meeting with her teacher if her attendance was too poor.

Shihouin Academy tended to accommodate the students like that.

A witch’s schedule was mostly determined by the organization she belonged to, so some could not do anything during the day and others were restricted to lucky days. Some had magic eyes that prevented them from looking at or even in the general direction of a member of an opposing organization in their class, so it was hard gathering everyone in one place.

During the exam period, all of them stayed in the classroom, but Hunter confidently showed up in the dining hall.

“I’d starve if I didn’t.”

Some were strong enough to survive off of the dorm’s shop or off of water and

mist alone, but this was the only place that cooked food to avoid different witches' taboos and had a store selling a wide variety of specialized catalysts and school supplies.

At the meal ticket vending machine guarded by partitions and elsewhere, there were posters saying "No Ranker Battles in the Dining Hall".

This was a den of witches.

The ones making the food "in order to help out the younger witches" were powerful individuals with longer histories than the teachers. Some had fought not in the Hexennacht ten years before but the ones twenty or thirty years before.

However, the ban on Ranker battles only applied inside. The outside was a different matter.

...Kagami and Horinouchi must have really wanted a fight since they know that and are still eating up on the terrace.

That said that they were willing to take on whoever wanted to fight, but that they also wanted to eat. The latter half seemed to hold the greater conviction. And according to one of Horinouchi's maids...

"Lady Mitsuru likes to lure in her targets!"

Hunter was not entirely sure what that was in reference to, but she got the idea it meant the girl was a real sniper.

Today was the same. Kagami and Horinouchi were eating on the terrace above. Hunter had been delayed cleaning up her equipment, so she was showing up late. She really should have been buying some sweet bread at the Special Equipment Division building's store and heading back to review the current lesson or exchange information on the exams with her friends.

...But, well, I'm exempt from the exams.

Let's take this easy, she thought while ordering the "Conqueror of Land and Sea Meal" which was a pork cutlet burger and a fish burger.

"If that's all you eat, you won't get the necessary nutrients," said the old cook lady beyond the counter. "You need to eat more meat!"

That seemed ridiculous, but she was served the tray regardless.

...Come to think of it, she might be telling me to order the “Conqueror of Land, Sea, and Air Meal” that comes with a chicken burger too.

But chickens don’t fly, so how is that “air”?

“Oh.”

She spotted a familiar face wearing glasses and reading the textbook opened on the table.

It was Mary.

...Eh? What’s she doing?

Hunter initially found this strange.

After all, the upper Rankers were exempt from the exams.

But Mary was very clearly studying and reviewing the material in a textbook.

Odd. Why would she need to do that?

Something else also seemed off, but she focused on the one mystery for now.

Then Mary suddenly spoke.

“Rank 4.”

At first, Hunter had no idea what she had said.

But eventually, it hit her.

...Oh, that’s me!

She referred to people by their rank, but that may have been due to being in the military in her original world.

She even referred to Kagami as “Brigadier General”. So Hunter decided to do the same.

“What is it, Rank 3?”

Mary pushed up her glasses and sighed. She did not even bother looking at Hunter.

“You are keeping me from my studies. Please leave.”

...Is she picking a fight with me!?

As soon as she thought that, she saw the cooks beyond the counter each pulling out a knife or plate they had no real need for.

Oh, no. I just about turned this into a danger zone. But she still had a question.

“...What are you doing?”

“You can’t tell?” asked Mary without stopping. “I am writing in order to study. ...I would have thought even you were familiar with the concept and meaning of writing.”

Hunter was pretty sure anyone who heard that would have tackled the girl to the ground.

But she decided to grow stubborn.

“Y’know... This school is pretty lax when it comes to exams and classes.”

She said it.

“Are you so stupid you can’t keep up without studying?”

...Is she picking a fight with me!?

Studying like this was necessary for Mary. She viewed it as her duty and task as a student. Thus...

“Just so you know, I was third in my year during last term’s finals.”

“Oh? That’s pretty high.”

“Heh. ...And where did you fall?”

“I was #1 on the practical exam.”

...Kh!

Mary belatedly realized she had been led right into that one.

“Hmm,” said the #4. “So what are you doing, Miss Third-in-Her-Class?”

Now you've done it, she thought with a stir in her heart. But then she heard the cooks in the kitchen switching off their fryers and stoves. They were preparing for battle.

Oops. This is the facility that provides most of my food. The Spell Division store seems permanently covered in the smell of herbs, so I might really be stuck with three canned drinks a day if I cause any trouble here.

Calm down, Mary Sue. You are living here to protect this world. Not to destroy the dining hall with an indigenous monkey.

...Besides, I can prove my point with my results.

So instead of responding to the girl's provocation, she answered her question.

"I am studying for the midterms and reviewing the material from class."

"The upper Rankers are exempt from the exams, you know?"

"Just because we are exempt does not mean we can grow reliant on that. We are students."

The dining hall fell silent.

After a while, the #4, those in kitchen, and the other students began to applaud.

Faced with this sudden focus, she blushed, stood up, and bowed in all four directions.

Once they started to stop, she sat down and the expressionless #4 spoke to her.

"But the upper Rankers are given that exemption because we've diverted our efforts elsewhere and shown real results in doing so. You have a point about being students, but are you sure you're acknowledging what you've accomplished?"

"I want to do this. I dropped a Rank. ...That means my skill was insufficient and I must make up for that deficiency. That is what this is."

"Then," said the #4. "Kagami and Horinouchi are up above, but do they not need to study?"

Mary could only nod.

“They are stronger than me, so they likely operate under a different logic. And after losing to them, I have no right to criticize them.”

Hunter was honestly creeped out.

...She has issues... She defines her world through Kagami and Horinouchi...

But Mary was here rather than with the source of that definition. Hunter decided to ask why that was.

“Why not go up and eat with them?”

“Sit at the same table as those two? I wouldn’t dare!”

...Hey... Can we maybe talk like normal human beings?

However, Hunter decided this was probably a type of religion. And Horinouchi was a shrine maiden.

But she kept some hope in her heart and continued speaking.

“C’mon, they’re just normal people. ...If you ignore their attack power and insanity.”

“You would mock those who defeated you...? That says a lot about you.”

“Yeah, this is saying a lot about you too and it’s honestly weirding me out...”

Mary sighed and relaxed her shoulders. She may have mistaken what Hunter had said. If she had taken that as a compliment, she may have had a handy ability to mentally explain away any insults people threw her way.

But Hunter still had a slight question.

“Hey, about the table you chose...”

Normally, people chose a seat toward the center of the dining hall. By the windows, they could be “traced” or “seen” by a remote-style witch. By the counter, they could end up in trouble with the witches waiting for their food.

So the center was the safest place, and yet...

“Why are you by the window?”

“Heh. You don’t understand? Because my mission has already begun.”

Hunter had kind of expected this, so she opened a communication spell circle. She tapped a recorded number and the call was answered almost immediately.

“It is I, but who is this? Oh, let me guess... Yes, this must be the manager of the ramen shop Ice Cold in Sakuragichou’s third block. I must apologize for scooping out all of the garlic, but you used so very much of it!”

“No, you idiot. Um, Kagami? Where are you sitting right now?”

“On the south edge by the stairs. Is something the matter?”

Hunter looked up to the ceiling and saw the bottom of the external staircase.

Finally, she stared expressionlessly up at the ceiling and spoke.

“You have a stalker down here, so could you try moving to another spot?”

Fifteen seconds later, Hunter saw Mary silently move her chair two tables over.

...How can she see that!?

Oh, now that I think about it, she stays in her Magino state at all times. I guess sensing a target’s ether would be pretty easy.

As Mary resumed studying as if nothing had happened, Hunter asked a question while thinking, *I’m being a pretty good sport about this, aren’t I?*

“Why are you sitting below them?”

“If a lower Ranker picks a fight with them, I will cut in from below. ...You couldn’t tell?”

“Yeah, sorry, but no, I couldn’t.”

That would mean jumping past Hunter to pick a fight, so she did actually sort of understand why Mary wanted to be a breakwater. She had been planning to do the same thing herself. However...

“You’ve really accepted Horinouchi, haven’t you?”

Mary felt a faint heat in her heart at the mention of Horinouchi.

That was the girl that Kagami, her brigadier general and teacher, had accepted as a partner.

Mary had honestly not paid any attention to Horinouchi before it had come to their Ranker battle. No, she had known the girl was a possible opponent, but she had underestimated Shinto shooting spells because her brain had been so inundated with thoughts about her brigadier general.

But the reality had been different.

According to the battle records, her brigadier general had stuck to being a tank and an attacker who kept Mary from attacking. Each of the battle's turning points had begun and ended with Horinouchi.

The most frightening of those was her overall ability that could be summed up with the word "shooting".

"I have no choice but to accept her."

After all...

"Is it normal for shots fired from the South Pole to hit me in Tokyo?"

The #4 silently hung her head in what could only be a sign of wholehearted agreement.

"Yeah..." said the #4.

It was unusual for her to agree with Mary. This of course brought Mary no joy, but she did say more just to confirm this with herself.

"There is more."

"Tell me."

"Very well." Mary voiced her recollection of that past battle. "The three shots she fired from the South Pole were effectively simultaneous. But high power shells will normally interfere with and deflect each other when they are that close."

"She probably expected that and added in some spell processing. ...Even my Hedgehog is restricted from firing two shells at once because of the interference

seen during experiments.”

“Come to think of it, one of Horinouchi’s shots negated your cannon, didn’t it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it did,” confirmed the #4. “I thought the one I fired to the ocean off of Brazil had missed, but if it had, there wouldn’t have been a pillar of water like that. ...No one could have imagined it, but that was a counter hit.”

But thinking back, that was completely insane.

“Just because you have data on the level of a surveillance satellite doesn’t mean you should counter an ultra-high speed shell.”

“She is a frightening person,” said Mary. “After all, a complete focus on attack power with only the bare minimum of defense applies to my Ira as well.”

“Come to think of it, that’s true. ...Although Horinouchi has superb mobility on a fundamental level thanks to having the Suzaku for a servant.”

“That’s true,” agreed Mary.

She then stopped writing and clasped her hands as if in prayer.

“But...can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

Mary paused for a breath before speaking.

“I can abandon defense power and focus on attack power because of my annihilation spell. It normally requires some kind of powerful spell like that. Either that or strengthening your spells with a backup organization like you do. ... So why does she use her own primitive physical shells?”

When she heard that, the #4 covered her face with her hands and bent her entire body backwards.

Horinouchi saw a communication spell open next to her face.

She checked it to find it was from Hunter. She had no reason not to answer, so she approved the connection.

“What is it, Hunter? Are you short on money?”

“Oh, sorry. I haven’t paid you back for that yakiniku, have I?”

“Oh, I used student council money for that, so don’t worry about it. That said, I will not take responsibility for you getting drunk and using your pile bunker to turn the skirt on the headmaster’s statue into a miniskirt.”

“Wait! That was me!? And here I was thinking someone had done a pretty shoddy job of it.”

“Ha ha ha,” laughed Kagami. “Horinouchi, I think Hunter might be ready to go finish the job.”

A communication spell circle arrived from the headmaster, but Horinouchi chopped it to pieces.

“Anyway, Hunter, what do you need? We haven’t made any plans for a post-midterms party yet.”

“No, it isn’t that. Um...”

“What is it?”

“Why do you use physical shells for your main cannon?”

“Don’t you do that too?”

“Oh?” Kagami crossed her arms and nodded from across the table. “Has Hunter begun to question her attack spell? Very well. You tell her, Horinouchi. Tell her that physical shells just feel so very good when you fire them! Do it!”

Horinouchi ignored the idiot and asked a question of her own.

“Do you need a new viewpoint for fine-tuning the Hedgehog?”

“Uh, no. Y’see, I have the US military working with me and supporting me, right?”

Oh, realized Horinouchi.

While she did have the support of the Horinouchi family, the cannon itself was her own personal ability.

As for why she did it that way...

“I want to do things for myself, so I chose a cannon structure that wasn’t too complicated and allowed me to supply ‘my own share’. And...”

She focused a little on Kagami’s reaction as she continued.

“My mother also used physical shells.”

Hunter realized she had fallen silent.

Mary was trying and failing to look down at her pen and notebook, but she eventually pushed up her glasses and looked Hunter’s way.

“What is it, #4?”

“Well, um, about Horinouchi...”

“Yes, why is it that she uses physical shells?”

Hunter answered without delay.

“She wanted to supply her own share, and that’s why she ended up like that.”

In other words...

“It’s her Japanese spirit. Her humility made her like that.”

She continued with an “also”.

“She says her mother was like that too.”

After saying that, she looked back toward Mary and held her head in her hands.

...Yeah. I know just what you’re thinking.

“In every world out there, the crazy people don’t realize how crazy they are.”

And thus the midterm exams began without issue.

Chapter 1: The Relief of Knowing Something is Coming

Chapter 1

“The Relief of Knowing Something is Coming”



**When serving something
Keep your head held high
As if to say this is your master's pride**

When serving something

Keep your head held high

As if to say this is your master's pride

At night and in her dorm room's lounge, Horinouchi felt the midterms had begun relatively well.

Across the table from her, Kagami was viewing online information with a spell circle and taking notes in a notebook. To the left, Hunter was on the carpet looking back and forth between a dictionary and a spell circle.

Horinouchi herself had a notebook open to review for the Modern Japanese exam the following day.

The occasional sound of a flipping page breaking the odd silence created a slight tension.

For the first time in the past few months, they actually felt like students.

...Well, if you get down to it, Shihouin Academy is a school.

The exams covered standard educational material, but with a focus on magic.

The Japanese class began with grasping the meaning of what was written, but then touched on the concept of *kotodama* using Waka and classic literature.

Math attempted to explain the truth of all things, chemistry tended to be about alchemy, and history was based on the formation and spread of folklore.

Of course, it did not particularly matter if they had low scores in any of those.

Witches all belonged to a specific culture. The exams would sometimes touch on taboos, so it was rare for everyone in a class to be able to solve a problem. When making hamburger steak with a partner in home ec, it was fairly common for someone to carelessly turn the meat into a catalyst and curse their partner. This year, when doing the back hip circle in pairs during gym, a continental witch had accidentally removed her partner's soul from her leg. That had caused quite a commotion.

The amazing part was that a "sorry, sorry" had been enough to get past it. But

it had been a Scandinavian witch who had returned the soul by kicking it back with her leg, so the world had a nice cycle set up.

Horinouchi chose to take the exams. She was the Student Council President after all.

But it had been a bit unexpected for Kagami to take the exams along with her. Not to mention...

“Why have you pretty much moved in with me?”

Kagami had settled down in a room near the entrance since the battle with Mary.

Horinouchi did know why it had happened: the battle with Mary itself.

In her skirmish with Hunter, Mary had split the academy’s artificial crust and the dorm building for faculty and others had been located along the crack that formed.

Kagami had apparently been living in an empty room (the roof actually) of the faculty dorm, but she had moved here once the crust reinforcement and repair construction had begun.

She had done so without permission, so at first...

“You showed up this early in the morning just to walk to school with me?”

But that assumption had been wrong. Horinouchi’s dorm covered the entire top floor, so its size was part of the problem, but it had more to do with how unthinkable a possibility it had been. She had only noticed a week after Kagami had moved in and the maids and Koutarou had already noticed by then.

“Lady Mitsuru, kicking Lady Kagami out would only cause a scene outside!”

That argument had been incredibly persuasive. By that point, Hunter and Mary were apparently fighting off the lower Rankers that attempted to move up, and given how interested Kagami had seemed in that information...

...She’s prepared to take any of them on if she has the chance...

And according to Kagami...

“Of course, Horinouchi. Even if it was primarily my sister’s doing, we created this world and I would like to see what possibilities it holds.”

However, Horinouchi had felt a chill when she saw Kagami and Hunter getting all excited about it.

At any rate, when Horinouchi thought about it, she discovered the main reason she had taken so long to notice her new roommate. She never even saw the maids except in the lounge or hallway, so...

...Ah. I’m like a child being kept in isolation!

This was a new realization for her.

But Kagami did not seem intent on sharing the space in any noticeable way. The only differences Horinouchi had noticed were a new toothbrush in the bathroom and some IZUMO “Crystal Wasabi” that she was curious to try out. However, she did sometimes notice a fair bit missing from her “Soi Matcha – For Purification”, so maybe Kagami had trouble with wasabi.

...And does this not say “Soy Matcha” because Kagami’s sister misspelled it?

Were those discrepancies between product names and the knowledge of the world’s residents just part of the setting? Lately, Horinouchi had found herself blaming the Black Witch for any questions about the world and she found it unbelievably annoying how this new knowledge had influenced her thought processes.

But it was now the third night of the midterms. As Hunter lay on the lounge floor drawing a problem diagram in a spell circle, Kagami suddenly spoke.

“Given the season, we need to have a Halloween party to celebrate the end of the midterms, Horinouchi.”

Why are you making that sound like a foregone conclusion!?

Hunter thought Halloween was the best choice.

“I’m not really sure how it happened, but I’m competing with Mary over our test scores. So it would be nice to have a Halloween party as a reward to help her get over losing.”

She honestly did not know how it had happened, but after leaving the dining hall together that day, Mary had declared war: “Then let us compete to see who ranks higher in our year.”

But...

...I'm already above you in that regard, so are you sure you want to do that?

Still, a Halloween party reward would be wonderful.

“In America, it wasn’t so much about costumes...I mean, the witches tended to come by to the Hexennacht orphans to do their ‘trick or treat’, so on Halloween itself, it didn’t feel all that special. The witches from different regions formed benefit organizations and they would visit the orphans’ houses to leave housework spirits, bread that never ran out for two weeks, or ham that regained its original thickness overnight no matter how much you cut off.”

“I feel that is beyond anything my sister could have imagined.”

Hunter looked up at Kagami’s comment.

“You mean it’s original to this world?”

“A creation cannot contain more knowledge than the author possesses. ...So anything set in motion by those inside it would be ‘outside’ my sister’s creation.”

According to Kagami...

“My sister and I knew very little about the Fuji crater lake hot springs land, but it exists here. My sister based this world on our world, so my world seems to have been included here as part of the ‘setting’. The information on the Hexennacht battles was placed on top of that and my sister has a habit of getting rid of the things she has difficulty understanding. But the aspects she was unaware of would have been untouched.”

“That’s a huge nuisance for those of us living here, you know?” Hunter rested her head in her hand while lying on the floor. “But what did your sister know about America?”

“We saw a fair number of cities there when traveling with our father for his job.”

“Yeah... That’s kind of what it felt like.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Hexennacht damage was mostly limited to the major military bases and a line from east to west that hit the major airports. People tend to say the Black Witch targeted the more populated areas, but I bet it was actually because those were the areas she knew best.”

“I can make no excuses for my sister when it comes to that.”

Kagami often joked about her sister, but in the end, she was intent on punishing her.

Horinouchi was a little unsure whether or not the decision seen there came from Kagami’s feelings. But...

“Well, it all comes down to the results. We must fight in Hexennacht.”

As she said that, Kagami’s expression partially faded but also showed a hint of realization.

But Horinouchi had something else to say.

“Once the midterms are over, we will almost certainly be faced with a Ranker Battle against the Rank 1. After that, the Black Witch will be right in front of us.”

“Assuming we defeat the Rank 1, you mean.”

Kagami smiled a little and then looked to Koutarou who stood at the counter behind Horinouchi.

“You said you have no information on the Rank 1, did you not?”

“We have heard she has held that spot ever since the headmaster established the Ranker System immediately after the end of the previous Hexennacht ten years ago.”

“Interesting. Have any of the Horinouchi maids fought the Rank 1?”

Horinouchi knew what answer Kagami would receive.

...None of them have.

If any had, they would already have that information, but they had none. That

meant the Rank 1 was unseen and inviolable. And of course, Koutarou's response was...

"There is one."

"There is one?"

This was news to Horinouchi, but Koutarou lowered his head a bit and reworded his answer.

"Or perhaps I should say there *was* one."

"You mean...?"

"After her defeat to the Rank 1, she left the Horinouchi family for a variety of reasons."

"How long ago was this?"

"Nine years ago."

Hunter's question and Koutarou's answer pointed to a certain fact.

"Then she really has held that position for ten years..."

"Yes. I once saw the power that gives her that position. It was when I was still a normal butler serving your mother."

"What was it?"

Koutarou paused for a moment but finally answered.

"She used an absolute defense and absolute attack to become unbeatable."

Koutarou took a breath and looked behind the counter.

Some maids were crouching in the space leading to the hallway, placing them out of view of Horinouchi and the other girls. The bespectacled Head Maid aimed a simplified Normal Device lance toward him.

"Head Butler, say anything unnecessary and I will stab you, so be careful."

"I will say nothing of the sort! And why are all of you here!?"

“Because this is related to Lady Mitsuru’s mother and the others,” said a picture book witch from Western Europe who looked like a child despite being a true veteran. “The maid who left did not say anything more because she felt this was not something she should get involved in. She came here after graduating and enjoyed her time among us, but she was afraid she would let some information slip if she let her emotions or her circumstances get the better of her. Do you understand?”

The witch looked up at him.

“I do not understand why since I never rose above Rank 8, but she felt the Rank 1 should be the one to fight on Hexennacht.”

Horinouchi felt like she had been presented with a riddle.

“Absolute defense...and attack?”

“She has both?”

“I would say Hunter is close to having that,” commented Kagami.

“Depending on how it’s used, Mary’s annihilation spell was an absolute defense and attack, wasn’t it?”

“But I do believe someone still managed to blast her. I believe she even managed to copy her.”

“Th-that was only because I caught her off guard. ...Right?”

Horinouchi looked to Hunter for agreement, but...

“Hunter? Why are you crouching down and covering your face!?”

“Because you’re making ridiculous demands...!”

“But,” said Kagami without warning. “The Rank 1 seems to pull off the ridiculous, so what do we do? Horinouchi, your mother was the previous Rank 1, so what spells and Frame did she use and fight with?”

Her mother’s spells and Frame.

Horinouchi gasped when Kagami asked her that.

She recalled saying goodbye to her mother, but...

“...That would be difficult to answer.”

Yes. There was one thing she did not know about the Hexennacht ten years ago.

“I don’t know.”

It had happened on a night ten years ago.

In just one night, most of the world had been broken and she had lost someone important to her.

Her memories of saying goodbye were so vivid, but there was something she did not know.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know how my mother fought.”

“You do not know? ...It must have been an intense battle. Are you saying you do not know what happened in it?”

“Yes.”

Horinouchi answered Kagami’s question.

...I really don’t.

She had no memory of the battle between her mother and the Black Witch. Or rather...

...It was erased.

How had her mother fought? How had she protected everyone? And how had she been defeated?

She had thought those things “existed” in her memories, but she did not know the answers.

She had a vague image. There was a lot of light and power there, but other than that...

“I don’t know...”

Kagami turned toward her.

She started to say something, held a hand up to her face, and then turned back around.

“Did you-...”

“You were about to ask if I became an idiot, weren’t you!? Weren’t you!?”

“No, no. You are a clever girl, Horinouchi.”

“But...” Hunter raised her hand. “Don’t you know about those things the Black Witch sent out when she was feeling cornered? Even we know about them.”

“Yes. ...The Black Witch summoned a large number of giant humanoids and dragons as reinforcements.”

She knew that. Those “reinforcements” were speculated to have descended to earth from satellite orbit. They had descended while entirely ignoring things like “distance” and “speed”, but they had made a soft landing on the surface.

They had used the rotation of the earth to descend along the equator in turn, so once everyone realized what was going on, the time lag before dropping had meant the US West Coast to the Oceania region should have received relatively little damage.

But their understanding of the situation had come from naked eye reports and confused, conflicting information, so they had only made it in time for the Polynesia region. That was likely why Hunter and the 7th Fleet she worked with tended to cooperate with the forces that still survived there. That was why Hunter had chosen the ocean near Hawaii for her first sniping position during her battle with Horinouchi and Kagami.

“Kagami, I guess I’ll ask... Did your sister have an opinion of Hawaii?”

“Yes, my sister had a traumatic experience picking up a sea cucumber on the beach there, but she generally liked the place.”

...I knew it.

Hunter was averting her gaze, but Horinouchi was growing used to that.

“But,” said Kagami. “What do you mean when you say you ‘don’t know’ about

the Black Witch's battle and your mother's battle?"

"She means exactly what she says, Lady Kagami."

Koutarou spoke from beyond the counter. He thoroughly polished a glass and stared at it before continuing.

"There are no detailed records of the battle with the Black Witch or how either side fought."

"Why not?"

Horinouchi answered that question.

"Because they were 'erased' by the Black Witch. From this world, from history, from everything."

"You mean...?"

"That is the Black Witch's power. It is a spell we call Concept Erasure," she explained. "It is the opposite of the power that created this world. The power to destroy this world and erase anything in it is used on whoever loses. ...So my mother's ability to resist was erased and the records were erased."

Since she knew about Kagami's existence and how this world had been created, Hunter had something to say about that.

"It's an eraser."

She understood.

It may have been a little late, but she now understood something about the Black Witch's destructive power.

"Instead of the power used to write and create this world, it's the power to erase. ...All records concerning the spells Horinouchi's mom used to oppose the Black Witch were erased with an eraser."

"If everything was erased together, I can see how there would be a blank at those portions alone," said Kagami. "Does that mean you inherited none of her techniques to oppose the Black Witch?"

"It does. ...For one thing, my mother was the first case of the Black Witch using

her erasure against someone.”

“It was?”

Hunter asked without thinking, but Horinouchi simply nodded. But then she tilted her head.

“I think the Black Witch must have been panicking a fair bit and it’s possible similar situations occurred in the past, but as far as my research could take me, my mother’s case is the only one where the erasure was used on any spells used against her as well.”

“That is too bad.” Kagami crossed her arms deeply across her chest. “If we knew what they were, giving you a power up would have been simple. Yes, you would have evolved from a Normal Manko into a Super Manko!”

Horinouchi stood up and Kagami gallantly fled at the exact same moment, so Hunter gave them a reminder.

“Hey, midterms. We’ve got exams to study for.”

Horinouchi heard Kagami speak as the two of them sat back down.

“But anyway, it is a shame we have no hint toward helping you grow, Horinouchi.”

“No, there is something.”

“Do you have a data defense that can defend against phenomenon-class erasure?”

“No, I just mean we still have the information not related to my mother’s spells during the final battle. So...”

Horinouchi summoned the Suzaku. When she looked atop her own right shoulder, she saw the Suzaku eating soba inside its spell circle. When its eyes met hers, it put on a serious look.

“...”

And it silently hid the bowl in the space beyond the spell circle. It then stood on a single leg and began chirping nonchalantly. Kagami and Hunter glared at

her.

“Horinouchi, about that servant...”

“B-birds eat soba too. I’m sure they love soba seeds.”

But the Suzaku was important to the conversation.

“The Suzaku contains Frame data stored by several generations of Horinouchi family representatives. So while I can call the Akerindou my own, I referenced the previous generations a lot when strengthening it.”

“Oh?” said Hunter, sounding impressed.

“In other words,” said Kagami while glaring at Horinouchi. “Your mother was also fully focused on attack power?”

“I can see why the Black Witch was so worried...” added Hunter.

“Yes, she must have decided that was something too dangerous to leave un-erased.”

“S-stop that, you two! Don’t make up things about my mother’s character!” Horinouchi turned toward Hunter. “Besides, Hunter, you understand the relationship between attack power, Frame size, and sturdiness, right?”

“Oh, yeah, I do. But depending on how you use it, the optimal values change a fair bit.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kagami.

Hunter used her hands to measure out a distance of about 50 cm.

“Y’see,” she began. “It’s pretty hard to actually use a Magino Frame class of magic wand, right? When it’s that big, any small manipulation is difficult and the efficiency of the power system gets pretty bad. At a military scale, everyone could work together to manage it, but Hexennacht is about heading out to fight on your own.”

“Are you saying Horinouchi’s Akerindou is at the limit of its growth?”

“There are probably areas I could improve on, but it’s time we started thinking about how to improve it on a more fundamental level.”

So...

“My mother might have made similar improvements for the final battle.”

“I see.”

Koutarou heard Kagami speak as she sat back down.

She was one of the creators of this world. She was much like the Black Witch, so she likely understood how the previous generation’s crucial knowledge had been lost and what that meant.

“In other words,” said Kagami as she raised her right index finger. “In the next Ranker Battle, we might get some kind of hint toward catching up to your mother. Right, Horinouchi?”

...Well done, Lady Kagami!

A voice overlapped Koutarou’s natural thoughts.

“Splendidly said, Lady Kagami.”

Someone appeared from behind the wall on the right side of the counter.

It was the Head Maid.

Horinouchi saw the Head Maid step out from around the hallway corner behind the counter.

She carried a tray bearing a tea set for the girls.

“Lady Mitsuru, I should probably tell you not to worry.”

“Not to worry...?”

“Yes,” said the Head Maid as she silently set down the cups and served the tea into them.

Hunter raised her hand.

“Oh, I want lots of lemon in mine!”

The Head Maid smiled and tossed a lemon into the air.

The lemon split in two directly above the cup she held up, and...

“Are you going to scoop it out?” asked Kagami.

“No, I will twist it apart. ...My spear Device can act as a high-rotation rifle round.”

As she spoke, the inside of the lemon vanished and fell into the cup as a somewhat paste-like liquid.

The Head Maid caught the falling lemon peel on an empty plate.

“I apologize for letting you see such a banal technique.”

“No, it was wonderful. ...How large of a fruit can you do that on? Would a grapefruit be too large?”

“Depending on the amount of power I use, I can do it to a watermelon or a metal drum. When I was a student and the Rank 3, this and my hairstyle gave me the Urban Name of Lady Drills.”

“Ohh, the Head Maid is having fun with it.”

Koutarou agreed with the maids sitting behind the counter. He glanced over at them as they used a spell circle to view the lounge.

“And when she went to serve that tea, didn’t she walk out to the hall while still crouched down before walking back out like normal? She did, didn’t she?”

“Head Butler, you’re the one that made the mistake of standing up. Leaning is important on a mission.”

“You forget that I am a normal person who took this job after graduating as a normal student.”

“Then please stop trying to resist us!”

“A heart of resistance has nothing to do with being a witch or a normal person!”

He ignored the witches when they accused him of sophistry. Then the witches cast a lip-reading spell on the spell circle image.

“Well, we understand why the Head Maid stepped out before walking back in.”

“Is it related to some kind of jinx?”

“No, it just would’ve been creepy if she suddenly stood up next to you.”

“What do you mean creepy!?”

“Oh, we weren’t calling you creepy, Head Butler.”

“That’s right, Head Butler. Please stop with the persecution complex just because you work with nothing but witches. If you keep persecuting us over your persecution complex...oh, but if I say that, your persecution complex will just make you hate us more!”

“Someone! Someone please! This maid has a persecution complex!”

The Head Maid was facing away from them to serve the tea, but a spell circle dropped from inside her skirt and onto the floor. It was set so only they could see it and it said,

“Shut up.”

Koutarou grimaced at the short message and the maids cheered.

“Well done, Head Maid!”

“Hold it, all of you! ‘Well done’ may only be used on Lady Mitsuru and her friends! It is not to be used on ourselves! They deserve a different level of praise than us!”

“I get what you’re saying, but that’s pretty creepy, Head Butler. Oh, and that’s only a low level insult.”

“If that’s low level, then the highest level would probably kill me!”

With a witch’s kotodama that might actually be possible, he realized.

After Koutarou tearfully retreated down the hallway for some reason, four maids stepped around the corner in his place. They were apparently going to prepare a snack.

Horinouchi felt this was a good time for a break, but she was also amused how much the Head Maid was enjoying her conversation with Kagami.

The Head Maid was from Germany and had been an underclassman of Lisbeth Lueger, who had been the German Representative and one of the Troika, aka the Three Sages. The Head Maid had graduated after rising to Rank 3, but rumor had it that was only due to focusing on supplying techniques to her home country after the damage it had taken in the previous Hexennacht.

She said she had come here because she had felt that graduating had lightened the load, but her skill remained and she was in charge of managing the other witches.

She was smiling as she spoke with Kagami.

That was a surprise because the woman was known for rarely smiling, but...

...Kagami's ether crafting spell must be an unknown technique to the Head Maid.

Yes, they were discussing technique. And that must have brought the Head Maid back to her days as the Rank 3.

...So it doesn't mean she was moved to emotion by Kagami's personality.

After thinking that, Horinouchi looked out the window.

She saw a difficult expression in her reflection.

“—————”

What was she so conflicted about?

...And why am I feeling jealous of the Head Maid!?

It was not that she did not understand her own feelings. This was clearly the same as finding her playmate was looking to someone else.

But there was something she wanted to ask while the Head Maid was in such a good mood.

“Head Maid? You said before that I shouldn't worry, didn't you?”

“Yes,” said the Head Maid while turning toward her.

The woman seemed to realize she had gotten sidetracked, so she fixed the position of her scarf, gave Kagami and silent nod, and spoke to Horinouchi.

“Whoever your opponent is, you are your mother’s daughter.”

“My mother...? Why bring her up here?”

The Head Maid smiled behind her glasses.

Her eyes were smiling as they stared thoughtfully into the distance. It was the look of someone reminiscing about the past.

She then looked directly at Horinouchi with the eyes of a witch.

“Our records still have data on your mother’s old Akerindou up until the battle to determine the Hexennacht representative. In other words, until the battle among the Troika. That is the situation you are in now,” she said. “So this is a jinx. Lady Mitsuru, a witch’s jinx says the same thing will happen in the same situation. The jinx will ensure that what happened with your mother will happen with you now. Even if the phenomenon was scrubbed from the world, no one can stop a jinx from taking effect in the world of witches. And even the Black Witch is a witch.”

“Then...”

The Head Maid closed her eyes in a smile and then lowered her head a little.

“We think that you too will gain the power needed to oppose the Black Witch in your battle with the Rank 1.”

Horinouchi listened to the Head Maid.

She saw the woman nod once and pour some more tea into each of the cups.

“It was your mother who took part in the previous Hexennacht, Lady Mitsuru.”

Horinouchi was well aware of that. She had been there ten years ago.

But that was her mother.

They had been discussing their concerns about the current Rank 1.

“I am not the same as my mother.”

“Very true,” chimed in Kagami. “Your name is different.”

Horinouchi glared at her for a short moment. *And that’s more of a nickname...*

no, I'd rather call it an insult.

However, the Head Maid bowed and stepped back. She placed her heels together and shifted her balance backwards at the hip.

“History’s most powerful witch challenges the Black Witch who has existed back to the very beginning of history. The ether and spells were enough to blind us if we had looked directly at them, but all that was defeated by the Black Witch’s rule-breaking strategy. She used reinforcements to destroy the surface which was not part of the fight. ...So to put it another way, we believe your mother would have won in a fair fight.”

“But,” said Horinouchi. “My mother lost and everything about her final battle was erased.”

“Yes. That is true. It is due to her loss that we are where we are now. And that is why I...why we came here as maids. Our justifications of protecting our homeland, our organization, or our family could be overwritten with a single goal: victory on Hexennacht. And we believe that you can surpass your mother.”

“You mean...?”

Before Horinouchi could ask anything more, the Head Maid stepped further back to end the conversation.

This meant she had nothing more to say.

She simply raised her head to reveal her normal emotionless-looking face.

She was back to normal.

So Horinouchi realized how the current head of the Horinouchi family should act.

“Yes,” she said while smiling to the Head Maid with her eyebrows slightly raised. “I hope for the same thing as you. I hope the battle with the Rank 1 will make us the strongest.”

...Well done, Lady Mitsuru!

The Head Maid silently expressed her praise as she listened to the other maids

moving around and suppressing their voices beyond the counter behind her.

So she reiterated herself aloud.

“Well done, Lady Mitsuru.”

She gave a true bow this time.

She had been unable to reach the point where she could say *that*. While she could perhaps say she simply *had not* reached that point, she stubbornly refused to say that.

But there was someone here who could say *that*.

And they were here to support that person.

...This has fulfilled the retroactive thoughts I did not notice at the time.

She took a breath.

“I apologize for the intrusion. If we can help with your midterms in any way, please tell us. The same goes for you as well, Lady Kagami and Lady Hunter.”

“In that case, Head Maid,” said Kagami. “Could we ask you to prepare a Halloween party after the midterms are complete?”

“Yes, of course. What scale, location, and food would you like?”

“It must be something that all of you may also attend.”

“Very well. Then...Lady Mitsuru?”

When she looked over, Horinouchi nodded and shrugged.

“Given the season, we can’t exactly do barbecue on the beach again, can we?”

They completed their midterms, the short break afterwards passed, and it came time for the graded exams to be returned.

Horinouchi and Kagami had prepared for the Halloween party during the break and, on the exam results day, they saw Hunter and Mary facing each other on the dining hall terrace.

...What are they doing?

Horinouchi gave them a look of “oh, that’s what” just as Hunter and Mary each pulled out a piece of paper and slammed it against the table.

“Draw!”

Really though, what are they doing?

Chapter 2: Not Even Worth Bargaining Over

Chapter 2

“Not Even Worth Bargaining Over”



Bet your life on it
Also your dignity, shame, and reputation
But do not bet money
Ever

Bet your life on it

Also your dignity, shame, and reputation

But do not bet money

Ever

On the dining hall terrace below the blue sky, Horinouchi saw Hunter make the first move.

She slammed some A4-sized papers on the table and announced her actions.

“I summon Modern Japanese in the attack position! But I use a special summon for the similar Classic Literature! And I summon one more face-down for defense!”

Just as Horinouchi prepared to ask what this all meant, Mary placed her own papers on the table across from Hunter.

“Then I summon this #1-in-my-year Spells in the attack position. ...And I special summon one in the face-down position. Do you really think #2 or #3 stands a chance against #1? Attack!”

“Wait.”

“Not so fast, Horinouchi!” said Kagami while raising the tray that held her lunch. “Two warriors are betting their pride and who pays for our lunches!”

Mary looked to Kagami’s tray and the food it held: a mountain of burgers, ice cream and adzuki beans in a cup (known as the dining hall sundae), ham, and salad.

...She set us up again, didn’t she!?

This unique brand of anger made her feel somewhat homesick, but she was pretty sure this was a form of power harassment. However, Horinouchi spoke up with a hot sandwich, fried chicken wings, and even a fruit salad piled up on her own tray.

“I guess it can’t be helped then,” she said with a sigh.

...What does that mean!?

Was she accepting that either Mary or Hunter would have to pay? Or was she exasperated that the two girls would go that far to pay for her lunch? Regardless...

...What kind of flowers does she have growing in her brain!?

A bet did seem like a good way of taking the competition seriously, but that “it can’t be helped” made it sound childish.

Mary felt like she was being belittled in an unexpected way, but as for the child across from her...

“Looks like you’re ready to do this, Rank 3!!”

Hunter even clenched her fist, so Mary wondered if she was on the same level as the girl.

But she was more curious about the contents of Kagami and Horinouchi’s trays. Not only was there a lot there with the hamburgers and salads and such, but...

...Do you two not order anything to drink!?

As soon as she wondered that, Kagami seemed to realize something.

“Oh, no. Horinouchi, how about this? ...Okay, you two. Let us say that whoever loses also must go down and buy us each a drink.”

...How does ‘how about this’ lead into ‘okay’!?

Mary wanted to protest so very badly, but Horinouchi sighed again.

“I guess it can’t be helped.”

Is there just a part of this world’s grammar and expressions that I don’t understand?

Mary heard some comments of “they’re monsters” from their surroundings, but Kagami had something else to say.

“What is the matter? You just have to win, don’t you? It is only natural for the loser to feel frustrated.”

“In that case...intercept!!”

Hunter flipped over her defense position paper.

Hunter made a counterattack.

...I have a trick up my sleeve!

Just look at the exam I was holding in reserve.

“I use my #1-in-the-year Shop exam to counter your #1! I then attack with my #2 and #3 Modern Japanese and Classic Literature!”

“In that case...” Mary flipped over her face-down paper to place it in attack position. “I scored #1 in both Spells and Spell History, so I can counteract your Modern Japanese and Classic Literature even if I allow you supplementary lessons!”

Hunter groaned.

Meanwhile, Horinouchi and Kagami had left their trays with the butler and they placed some papers over Mary’s.

One of them placed one and the other two.

“I scored #1 in Practical Spells which focuses more on battle than the spells themselves.”

“Let us just say that I was #1 in Physics and Math.”

Hunter groaned again.

“Th-that means you tie with us or at least make for a worthy opponent!”

“I guess it can’t be helped.”

Horinouchi sighed for a third time, let her shoulders droop, and pulled out another paper. Kagami then placed another paper on top of that.

The forms were identical.

...The same exam?

It was the exam for....

“General Home Ec,” said Horinouchi. “I was #1.”

“And I was #2,” chimed in Kagami. “Your exams would have covered the same topics, so how did you two do in makeup, cooking, and etiquette?”

Mary threw her hands up in the air, but the Rank 4 collapsed to her knees, so Mary felt that made this her victory.

“How is it fair using etiquette when it’s mostly based on Japanese standards?”

“And makeup is dangerous for the Spell Division because it’s treated as an emblem, so we barely ever use it.”

“Oh, look at that, Horinouchi. We order our drinks and all we get are grumbling complaints. ...Remember, we both need a drink.”

“Don’t take it too far,” said Horinouchi while holding out a hand to stop Kagami. Then she started eating the lunch at the table.

During the post-exams break, she and Kagami had visited Yokohama and Kawasaki and prepared for Halloween, so she had not eaten the academy’s food in a while.

The school that the academy had been based on had had a business partnership with a hotel restaurant. The hotel itself had gone out of business after Hexennacht, and...

...I have a feeling Kagami and I destroyed it during our battle...

No, she was absolutely certain of it.

Well, it was officially an abandoned building in the off-limits zone, she rationalized.

Even if the flavor had changed a fair bit since then, it was still more than enough for a lunch.

She quite liked the hot sandwiches here. The fillings were placed between two pieces of toasted bread and then a special grill was used to lightly toast them a second time, bringing the bread and fillings together. She also liked how the bread tasted more like roasted wheat than just toast. She could think about all

of this because...

...I have the time to stop and relax.

During the exams, her thoughts had been focused on scoring as many points as she could. The goal of the exams was to give them knowledge and countermeasures, so it was easy to know what would be covered.

But that was not true of her next task: the Ranker Battle. They had to fight the mysterious Rank 1.

There was nothing but unknowns there. But was she anxious?

“————”

She felt like their recent preparations and relaxation had been more about being able to concentrate than about taking a break.

In which case...

“Starting tonight, we should be busy going over our spells and putting together what information we have for the next Ranker Battle.”

“Eh? Then when are you doing that Halloween party?” asked Hunter.

“What?” asked Horinouchi with a tilt of the head.

She snapped her fingers and Koutarou walked over. He already had two costume cases in his hands.

She pointed to them.

“It’s about to begin down below. Hunter...and Mary too, are you two emptyhanded?”

“No one told me about that!!”

“I wasn’t informed either!”

Hearing that protest in stereo, Horinouchi turned to Kagami.

“Um, Kagami...?”

“Hm.” Kagami crossed her arms and solemnly stared into the distance. “There must have been a breakdown in communications. ...But it would probably be best for all involved to not investigate who is at fault.”

...Th-this girl...!

Horinouchi glared at her, but she doubted it would have any effect. She was worried about what was to come, but this would be over by midnight. However, Hunter spoke up while Mary started calculating something with a calculator spell.

“Well, I’m fine with going in wild, but you said it’s happening down below?”

“Yes. It is primarily being run by the General Division. Then again, it is really just an official school costume party. Actually name it after Halloween and it could easily trigger some kind of ritual spell. ...Now, let us enjoy the festivities.”

Chapter 3: The Relief of Simply Watching Over

Chapter 3

"The Relief of Simply Watching Over"



What is this
Brand new form of flirting
Between a shrine maiden and holy knight?

What is this

Brand new form of flirting

Between a shrine maiden and holy knight?

Koutarou was reminded what it meant to be bullied.

...And yet they're supposed to treat me like our U.A.H.J. division chief.

"Oh, don't move, Head Butler. Move and it could become an emblem and activate a spell."

The maid in front of him pressed a foundation puff against his cheeks.

They were in a dressing room created by the partitions set up in the dining hall. It was set up for boys, but since Shihouin Academy was a witch school, he was the only one using it.

As for what he was using it for...

"Why am I dressed like a maid?"

A redheaded maid answered him while hiding a medal below her eyepatch.

"Well, you know? It's like how they would treat a child as the opposite sex to trick any evil spirits and rid those spirits of all meaning. And there are going to be a lot of witches taking it easy today, so you have to be careful as the only guy."

"And yet I have some of the best passive divine protection spells in the country."

His complaint had no effect on the maids. They used eye shadow, lipstick, and other terms he normally never ran across to give him his "costume".

Partway through, Horinouchi poked her head through the curtain forming the partition.

"Koutarou, are you-..."

She burst out laughing as soon as she saw him. As she looked away and tried to suppress the laughter, someone else spoke from beyond the curtain.

"What is it, Horinouchi!? Has something horrible happened to Koutarou!?"

I really don't want her to see this, he thought from the bottom of his heart, but he also prepared himself because he knew Kagami would see it eventually. And at the same time, he was usually one of those helping prepare and he had done that today as well, but...

...It all feels different when I'm also a participant.

He could hear the voices of the students gathering outside the partition.

The party was being held inside and outside the dining hall, so it covered a wide area. They had more outside lights on than usual and a lot of bonfire-like fires had been lit. All Koutarou and the maids had to do was cook and serve the food. That was the same as always, but...

"Where are your costumes?"

"Eh? Oh, we'll do that very last. And when we do, Head Butler, we'll give you another costume too, okay?"

"Then why even dress me up like this!?"

He was answered by a witch silently shoving lipstick against his lips. Only afterwards did she expressionlessly speak.

"Ohh, sorry, Head Butler. If you don't stay quiet, I'll accidentally write a sudden-death emblem, so please keep silent."

Everyone's more normal than I expected, thought Hunter.

There were bunny girls as well as dog girls and cat girls who had simply changed the ears and tails, but there was also a goat girl that she was pretty sure was a demonic symbol. But in addition to the baseball and soccer players...

"Kagami, what kind of athlete is that supposed to be?"

"A kabaddi player. It is most known for repeatedly jumping left and right. That over there is a sepak takraw player, but even I initially mistook her for a handballer."

As Kagami (who wore a shrine maiden outfit) looked disappointed in her own mistake, a bowling pin walked past her, but Hunter wanted to believe that was

not a familiar or something like that. As for Hunter herself...

“Hunter, what are you? A fighting game character?”

“Um, yeah. I’m the protagonist of Storm Apocalypse. You can pull it off with a karate *gi* and kendo armor. You also need a golf club to go with the karate.”

“My sister always liked the rival character in that.”

“So she liked rampaging around with a powerful character, did she?”

Meanwhile, a criminal approached. The criminal had her arms passed through a metal frame and she dragged around a metal ball chained to her ankle.

“Oh, brigadier general, Rank 4. This is where you were.”

“Just because you’re always an executioner is no reason to become a criminal as a change of pace.”

“This was a classmate’s idea. I intended to come as an executioner.”

How little creativity do you have? wondered Hunter, but she held her tongue. Also...

“What are you gonna do about your hands?”

Mary moved her hands inside the parallel holes. Then she pulled them lightly back.

“Heh. This is just a costume, so I can easily remove them should the need-...”

Her wrists clunked against the wooden holes and came to a stop.

“...”

She tried a few more times, but they would not budge. *Why am I not surprised?* thought Hunter while glaring at her.

“Did your friends do too good a job for you?”

“...Brigadier general, can I cut this away with my annihilation?”

“Is the criminal planning to become a jailbreaker?”

“And if you remove that, wouldn’t you just be wearing old pajamas?”

“Y-you just had to say that, didn’t you!?”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” replied Hunter as Horinouchi approached through a group of girls dressed as the British Queen’s Guard.

“Eh?”

The confused voice came from Mary.

And Hunter fully understood that confusion. Kagami did too, but...

“Dressing up as each other, huh?”

Hunter sensed the bitter smile on her lips as she commented on the two girls’ costumes.

“Kagami’s dressed as a shrine maiden and Horinouchi as a holy knight. ...You couldn’t have made it more obvious you were dressing up as each other.”

Horinouchi wanted to say it had not been intentional, but she knew they would never buy that.

The idea had come from a casual comment Kagami had made as they went shopping to prepare for the party during the post-exam break.

They had been in the Yokohama shopping district that smelled of soy sauce and oyster sauce.

“Now that I think about it, we are allowed the Buddy System for Hexennacht, but even though we get along well enough for me to call you Manko, I know very little about shrine maidens.”

“Part of that sentence does not fit with the rest of it!”

But as they ate and drank steamed buns, soup, and jasmine tea at the table in front of a Chinese restaurant, Horinouchi had lent Kagami a handkerchief and explained all about shrine maidens.

And as a result...

“So the shooting spells are your personal technique and the shrine maiden part is only relevant to the foundation!”

Horinouchi had considered throwing the teapot at her, but she had restrained herself since it did not belong to them.

At any rate, Kagami seemed to have really liked that conclusion.

“Okay, I have a better understanding now! And since it does not require shooting anything, I will go with a shrine maiden costume!”

“Why is your decision based on that?”

“And you will be going as a holy knight, right?”

...*What!?*

Horinouchi thought she had done a good job of expressing her doubts through her expression, but the idiot in front of her had simply smiled while flipping through a picture book of *The Water Margin* she had bought at a souvenir shop in Chinatown.

“But, Horinouchi! My holy knight fashion is merely a result of this world and Dikaio reacting to my burning heart of justice, so I have next to no knowledge of holy knights. That means I must leave it to you to study up on the holy knight part! I know you can do it, Horinouchi!”

Thinking back on it, Horinouchi could tell it was her own fault for not vehemently protesting.

And that brought her back to the present.

She was a holy knight.

She had not wanted to dress up exactly like Kagami and she could not sew herself anything like a power arm.

So she wore armor and a cape on the shoulders and a skirt that spread out from her waist. She had made it herself and she had been severely lacking in information, but...

“You look lovely, Horinouchi.”

“Your shrine maiden outfit is one of our ready-made ones, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I was surprised to find the chest size could be special ordered in ‘Lady Mitsuru’ size.”

“A-are they *trying* to reveal my personal information!?”

“What is wrong with that?” asked Kagami.

Kagami then reached a hand out toward Horinouchi and maintained that stance.

...No fair.

It would have shamed her for Horinouchi to not take her hand.

But Horinouchi knew it would be meaningless for her to do that to Kagami and Kagami was also well aware of that fact.

She felt like she was being tested, so she spoke in an attempt to keep them on equal footing.

“Don’t you have something to say?”

“My hand is lonely, Horinouchi. At this rate, my fingers will die of loneliness.”

“There’s no helping you, is there?”

She took Kagami’s hand.

What was that “oh” for, Hunter? You don’t have to say anything.

...Honestly!

Not even Horinouchi knew who her anger was directed at. But...

“Now, it’s about time for the party to officially begin! But first, the headmaster has arrived!”

Koutarou stood on the entrance stage dressed as a maid, gave his announcement through a microphone, and then loudly applauded. The surrounding maids continued with the applause and the students realized what was going on. A group wearing cardboard boxes and a group dressed as firefighters began clapping and the rest followed.



“...!”

And just as everyone thought the stage was set for the headmaster to enter the room, the dining hall’s entrance opened and someone walked through.

It was the headmaster.

However, she was wearing a student uniform that did not even come close to fitting her and her hair was done up in twintails. She carried her own microphone, stood on the stage, and struck a pose.

“Good eeeeevening! Please welcome your new schoolmate, Shihouin Cerisier!”

Two buttons burst from the uniform’s stomach.

On the opposite coast, the people living in Shinagawa saw a bright white light from Shihouin Academy in the center of Tokyo Bay to their northwest. It happened during dinnertime and a lot of houses still had their windows open due to the lingering seasonal heat, so a lot of people saw it.

Barely any of them knew what the light was, but an old witch who owned a general store near Shinagawa Station did. The witch was known as the Sculpting Granny because she could form a straw doll starting from any part of the body and she currently held a doll made from a folded cigarette box.

“I-is that what I think it is...!?”

“Wh-what is it, granny!? Do you know what it is!?”

“That is the light of a tsukkomi spell that can only be activated by a group of witches!”

“Have you gone senile!?”

She threw a right hook at her grandchild and said more.

“And that is the highest level of tsukkomi spell...the Whiteout!”

In a manga, that would have been three full panels of pure white, thought Hunter as she viewed the scene.

The headmaster was quickly carried out back by the maids and a stuffed bear on a chair took her place. With all eyes on him, the crossdresser struck a pose and gave a shout.

“Let the festivities begin!”

Horinouchi had a surprising number of thoughts about the party.

After all, the school’s different divisions and years were mixed together. They were not divided between school building like they were during the school festival and they were not in competition like they were during the athletic festival.

They were allowed to mingle together here.

She was glad she had the maids, Hunter, and Mary with her. A lot of witches had come to greet her and the underclassmen had come to encourage her or to ask to have a picture taken with her.

She had refused the pictures because they could be used for curses, but after ensuring it did not violate each other’s taboos, they had shaken hands and spoken together. She felt it had been a worthwhile time, but...

“Sigh.”

The heat of the place seemed to get the better of her, so she made her way to the rooftop terrace.

She rested her elbow on the railing by the entrance and the wind carried the smell of the food to her. The festive atmosphere seemed very strange to her and she stared forward.

She could see people gathered in the lights below.

In addition to the outdoor lights, people were carrying pumpkin-shaped lanterns. They dangled from sticks and cast their orange light on the road.

Some were picking up food at the dining hall and returning to their dorm while others were resting in the courtyard.

As the lights moved within the courtyard forest, they looked like will-o’-the-

wisps.

...You can see pretty far when you come here at night.

As she stared out into the courtyard forest, Kagami arrived next to her.

“The courtyard’s vending machine plaza is surprisingly far away.”

“The mausoleum is the center of the academy. It’s equally distant from everything else.”

Kagami’s eyes were focused on a brightly-lit spot beyond the leafy rooftop of the forest. Below that white light was the mausoleum and the vending machine plaza.

“Horinouchi, about that mausoleum...”

“My mother is not inside, if that’s what you’re asking. Due to the erasure of the phenomena surrounding her, her body was sent in for an autopsy. When it was returned...I assume they were being considerate because all of her injuries had been ‘healed’. So she is now resting below Horinouchi family land.”

“Thank you.”

Horinouchi understood that Kagami was hanging her head while looking at the lights and moving costumes down below.

She did not see it or know it, but she understood that *Kagami would be doing that*.

So she spoke.

“Kagami. Tears will not bring her back.”

But...

“I do appreciate your tears.”

...I-I’m a little too easily won over, aren’t I?

She went too far with her lip service.

But there were some things she could only say when it was dark and there was light down below.

The night really does have a way of making people honest, doesn't it? she thought. So...

...That's right.

Kagami had once told her something. On the pier when Koutarou had told her about Horinouchi's mother, she had shed her tears and said...

...It saddens me that you were filled with sadness.

Was Horinouchi thinking the same thing now?

She was not sure.

"If..."

"Do you need something?"

"If I ever thought something on a level equal or even greater than you...would that mean this created world had surpassedes the Black Witch?"

"Well..."

Kagami looked up and laughed bitterly.

Horinouchi felt herself blush when she heard it. It felt like Kagami was laughing at everything she had been thinking.

"Well, that was rude!"

"I apologize. But if that is the case, then you have already defeated the Black Witch."

"...Really?"

"Of course, silly."

Hunter climbed up from outside the railing she was resting her elbow on. She pulled herself up as if by a rope instead of with a pull-up motion and she stood on the other side of the railing.

"You need to be more open with your thoughts, Horinouchi."

"A-about what!?"

"Calm down." The criminal skillfully climbed up as well. "Miss Horinouchi."

Miss? she thought, but she could not fault the girl for being polite. And...

“You fired three rapid shots from the South Pole and they were multi-stage arrows at that. Shouldn’t we assume that has already surpassed anything the Black Witch could have imagined?”

“So you’re going there, are you...?”

But was that really true? She did think she needed firepower to defeat the Black Witch and most witches had firepower at their foundation, but based on what she had discussed with Kagami, she had a feeling there was something more important than that. Namely...

“If we cannot surpass the Black Witch in imagination, firepower is meaningless no matter how great.”

The Black Witch would understand the means of expressing firepower, so she would make those things her own and strengthen them as far as her imagination would allow.

They could not defeat her like that.

Creativity was what mattered. They needed something the Black Witch could not imagine. Or something she could not deal with even if she could imagine it. If they could think like that...

...Would we be able to win?

They only had to surpass the Black Witch.

It was a simple idea, but it led to something else. It was something the Head Maid had mentioned during the exams.

“During the battle for Rank 1, my mother found a power that allowed her to oppose the Black Witch.”

Just as she said that and Kagami nodded next to her...

“Lady Mitsuru.”

She heard the Head Maid’s voice from further back on the terrace.

There was no stairway up on that end and there had been no one there when Horinouchi had arrived.

But the older witch called to her in this nighttime atmosphere that had become less than festive.

So she turned around along with Kagami, Hunter, and Mary.

Everyone was there. It was all of the Horinouchi maids.

Is that a costume? wondered Hunter.

The Head Maid was wearing a military uniform. It was the U.A.H.G. uniform which was based on a German Air Force uniform.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen that. I guess it was true that the 200th Division was brought back.”

“Even in my generation, it already belonged to the Federal Republic,” said the Head Maid with a smile.

Similarly, the maids behind her wore different uniforms.

Only going on the ones Hunter recognized, the one behind the Head Maid was from the KSK, the airborne troops of the German army. If the 200th Division was no longer performing bombing missions, then their only connection would be how seriously Germany was about witch strategies.

There were also familiar SAS and SBS uniforms from the UK, but the one in the blue beret of the D11 metropolitan police special forces was standing out front. That may have been a sign that the real authority concerning Hexennacht was laid at the queen’s feet.

There was also one from France’s GIGN, a group Hunter had once defeated in training back home, and one from Australia’s SASR, a group that had been a lot of help during the battle against Mary. Canada’s JTF-U.A.H. had apparently been causing trouble in some territorial conflicts back home. Poland’s GROM was known as an emergency response unit, but that worked well enough since emergencies were an everyday occurrence these days.

She also saw the JSDF uniforms of a ninja unit, regional troops, and military police.

...It’s kind of impressive they can get along without more conflict.

But more were from America than anywhere else.

“If my people saw this, it’d probably be like a class reunion.”

She had heard there was a witch from MARSOC who had been a former Ranker, but this was her first time seeing the woman. There were enough SWAT uniforms to form a platoon, some familiar SEALs, some in berets, and a few in suits.

She saw a few ethnic types that looked like gypsies, but since she could see a few different varieties there, she guessed there some Yenish in addition to the Roma. Although she did not know enough to know which were which. There was even one who was clearly an indigenous African, but their madman style was way too conspicuous.

“I have to admit, there’s a lot of you.”

“Yes, there are. ...It has been ten years since Lady Mitsuru’s mother’s defeat. And in that time, this many people have gathered here.”

As the Head Maid said that, someone stepped out in front of the group. A figure in the armored uniform of a Japanese U.A.H.J. combat unit stood alongside the Head Maid.

He removed his helmet to reveal the butler’s face with makeup still intact.

...That’s just scary!

I need to cancel that out by eating some meat later on, decided Hunter as the butler spoke.

“Lady Mitsuru...and Lady Kagami too.”

Everyone lowered their heads.

“Every last one of us will provide backup during your battle against the Rank 1.”

Horinouchi accepted her subordinates’ bow.

She had seen this a few times before. They had not been wearing those uniforms, but they had all expressed their expectations for her in this way

several times.

But it was somehow different this time.

That was partially due to the important Ranker Battle coming up, but...

...I understand.

There was a reason they wore their various uniforms.

They had hidden their identities and arrived as witches, but now they were revealing their origins.

Most of them still had some connection to their former organizations. But they were at best a reserve member. In some cases, it really was just a connection and that organization would provide no support.

So this was only a show of their former glory.

People who had held so much power were now supporting her. That was what this meant. But...

“Yes.”

This did not place any pressure on Horinouchi. They had their expectations and they had their thoughts, but...

“Let’s win this together.”

She understood. Just a few months before, this would only have been a show of strength, but now she could say it for real.

“That is what I intend as well. I could not have won up to this point if I had been alone.”

Yes. Ever since a strange visitor had arrived, she had gained a partner within the Buddy System and she was not alone.

So she understood that everyone’s expectations would assist her from here on.

They expected her to be someone worthy of being given their strength.

This was not just a delusional hope.

Power could be handed over to someone else. So the Head Maid smiled and

spoke with her head still bowed.

“I am pleased to hear that.”

It looked like Head Butler Koutarou would be the first to raise his head, but then a witch in a police uniform raised her head prematurely before quickly lowering it again. Since the surrounding witches tugged her back down by the uniform, their cooperation seemed adequate.

Then they all stood up and Koutarou spoke.

“We do not know who your opponent will be in the Rank 1 battle, but we have a rogue factor of our own.”

“Do you mean Kagami?”

“I see.” The girl in a shrine maiden costume crossed her arms and lifted the corners of her mouth. “Just as we know nothing of them, they know nothing of me. Is that what you mean?”

“We believe that Lady Mitsuru could win even on her own.”

None of the maids made a move when Koutarou said that.

They had their pride as her supporters. So...

“Kagami...”

Horinouchi prepared to thoughtlessly tell Kagami that did not mean she was unneeded, but Kagami spoke to the others before she could.

“So the one Horinouchi can most rely on during battle is me.”

Meaning...

“You are all leaving your precious Manko with me, aren’t you?”

...Well done, brigadier general!

Mary thought about what she had just heard.

...Way to earn their trust by using Horinouchi’s true name!

Immediately afterwards, Horinouchi hit Kagami with a fairly sharp side kick.

Everyone enjoyed the festive atmosphere, the food, the conversation, and the liberation from the exams, but they all felt like something was missing.

However, that something arrived without warning. They heard a voice.

It came from the dining hall terrace a story above them. The usual two stood next to the railing like it was a stage.

“Everyone was being so considerate to sum up a number of issues at once, so why in the world would you start calling me Manko!? Why would you suddenly call me Manko here!?”

“I only said it once, so calm down, Horinouchi. There are times when a girl just cannot resist.”

“Try a little harder to resist! ...And stop laughing, Koutarou and Head Maid!”

“Yes,” said one of the witches.

She looked up at them as the criminal tilted her restraints along with her head and the karate fighter in partial kendo armor shrugged.

“Well done, Rank 2!”

Everyone else nodded and raised their pumpkin lanterns. Beyond those lights, the holy knight grabbed the shrine maiden by the collar and protested on the stage.

They all laughed as if to say this was more like it.

It was an excellent party. It ended with laughter and led into the next event.

“The Ranker Battle.”

That was right.

“The final Ranker Battle is coming up!”

The headmaster sighed and lightly spun around in her office.

Her reflection in the mirror was still wearing a school uniform.

“The uniform is different from when I was a student, but the girls these days

have excellent figures...”

She thoughtfully rubbed the stomach with its missing buttons. She looked pathetic, but she knew there was a smile on her face.

...This is so much fun.

She could immediately recall equally fun times from her days as a student.

“If anything, it was usually me cutting loose, Mitsuyo getting dragged into it, and Lisbeth moving in to support us.”

She continued with a “but”.

“How will it work from now on? No, I suppose we’ve already moved beyond that.”

A few spell circles were opened on her desk. They were images of the party someone had taken. The faces of the witches were blurred out by an information concealment spell, but some of them were a selfie taken by a girl in a gasmask.

The headmaster smiled a little as she looked at them.

“It’s about time that Miss Horinouchi and the others learned everything. And...”

The last of the spell circles was a communications one with a U.A.H. seal. It was from...

“Lisbeth Lueger. One of the current U.A.H.’s founders and their current General Commander of the Asian region. I know what it is you want, but do you understand what that will mean?”

As if to check, she took a picture of herself in her current outfit and attached it to her response.

“It will mean war. You’re prepared for that, aren’t you? That too is a witch’s party, Lisbeth.”

Chapter 4: Days to Say Goodbye

Chapter 4

“Days to Say Goodbye”



I run along
To become life-sized

I run along

To become life-sized

“We called it a Halloween party, but since we held it before the end of October, the end of the month is going to feel somewhat empty.”

Kagami commented as she viewed a calendar on a spell circle, so Hunter looked around the area.

“And we really had a party last night, didn’t we?”

Girls in uniforms were crouching down everywhere she could see in the afterschool courtyard. They all held translucent plastic bags.

“I didn’t think the party would end with picking up the trash. ...And we never really left the terrace up top.”

“It is called joint responsibility, Horinouchi. Being Student Council President is not easy, is it?”

Horinouchi refused to voice any agreement, but that was likely her form of pride.

So Hunter decided to go along with it without complaining.

It was a job.

They were at the flower garden that gave a view of the Honors Division building to the north. They were on the path cutting between different levels of flowers that bloomed in fall.

Instead of just littering, it looked more like people had dropped things while enjoying themselves, but there was still a fair bit of trash between the flower beds and the path. They picked it up with metal tongs and stuck it in their bags, but...

“Oh, I just remembered there’s another event today. Had you heard?”

“I had,” replied Horinouchi.

Kagami and the Rank 3 only tilted their heads.

Hunter shrugged and opened a spell circle for those two.

“European U.A.H. is having their Wand Viewing.”

“Wand Viewing? What might that be?”

Kagami’s tone made it clear she had a good guess, but Hunter answered anyway.

“They’re rolling out mass-produced Magino Frames for Hexennacht.”

“Hm? But don’t they have us for Hexennacht?”

“The Black Witch had her troops descend from the moon during the previous Hexennacht, right? This is meant to combat those and for use in case the Rank 1 is defeated.”

“That’s right,” replied Horinouchi. “I would like to call them our backup, but they have their own problems to deal with.”

“You mean European politics?” The Rank 3 asked the question in her mind. “There are a lot of European witches in my division, so I hear about it from time to time. In Europe, they have already estimated a few patterns for the damage they will take on Hexennacht and they are already beginning the power games for after the battle.”

Hunter sensed a resignation distinct from anger in the girl’s voice. Which meant...

...Has she changed as far as that’s concerned?

In the past, she probably would have been angry that someone would not be working to protect the world.

But now she gave off an air of exasperation.

...Yeah, that’s it.

She was disappointed that the people she was to protect only saw this threat to the world through a political lens.

She was now on the side of the protectors. She no longer thought the entire world was just like her and she instead tried to see it as something she needed to protect.

“I see.”

Hunter had also been called a fool in the past few months.

She could not act like Mary’s better and she felt more camaraderie than anything. Of course, if she actually said that, the Rank 3 would insist she was wrong.

...She needs to eat some meat and chill out.

Despite that thoughtful point, everyone had their own dietary habits. And while Hunter thought about that, Kagami lightly raised her right hand and faced Hunter.

“That is what Europe is doing, but what about America?”

“Yeah, you’d think we’d be in on that, wouldn’t you? ...But to be honest, American U.A.H. is different from the other U.A.H.s.”

“That’s right,” replied Horinouchi. “Japanese U.A.H. has a military alliance with America, so it too is rather unique. That’s why it could build Shihouin Academy and the Ranker System.”

Horinouchi felt Japanese U.A.H.’s uniqueness was thanks to her mother and her companions.

After all, this was the battlefield the previous Hexennacht’s witch had chosen. Horinouchi’s mother had been lost, but one of the Troika had remained as the headmaster and created Shihouin Academy.

“In a way, the previous Hexennacht divided the different U.A.H.s.”

The European nations had received a powerful blow during that Hexennacht, but America had possessed enough emergency reserves and military power to make up for the damage they took. That had allowed America to partially leave as a U.A.H. member and to act independently. European U.A.H. had lacked the military and technological power to boss American U.A.H. around and it would have been dangerous to be dragged around by something like that.

Thanks to America’s sense of gender equality and their forces spread across the globe, America’s fleets had been quick to recover and had worked to

transport emergency supplies and ensure the safety of the sea and air routes. That had helped to make their presence known.

“At the time, Europe had agreed to have Hexennacht here because using a small eastern nation as the battlefield would prevent any damage to Europe. But in the end, Europe was severely damaged and there was even a major exodus of their witch forces.”

The European witches had had a simple reason for leaving Europe.

“Europe had abandoned this eastern land and made it a battlefield. To take revenge and to assist the recovery, witches from Europe and elsewhere gathered here. In a way, the headmaster’s decision to create a witch training institute here was a natural development.”

“But that would create a dearth of witches in Europe, wouldn’t it?” asked Kagami.

...You know the answer already, don’t you?

So Horinouchi answered while well aware this was a farce.

“That is why the European nations created a joint U.A.H. to assist their recovery and to strengthen the EU. Their own witches had left for Japan, so they had to create a native-born unit.”

And...

“And today is the long-awaited rollout of their mass-produced Magino Frames for Hexennacht. Europe likely intends to use this to climb onto the stage of international politics. Japan has Shihouin Academy, so we will express our joy that Europe has a way *to defend itself* while we remain on our guard for possible interference.”

A lot of information would be reaching the Horinouchi family, but Koutarou and the Horinouchi family itself would be working with the Imperial Household Agency to shut it down.

“This was my mother’s battlefield and is now the home of her successors. In a way, this is an inviolable land where no one can interfere.”

“Of course, that’s why foreigners like me come here for connections,” added

Hunter.

“Yes, it is oddly lax about that... Well, I have my connection to Shinto as well.”

Every country and organization wanted the knowledge and techniques of the witches that had left them. That could be useful if it meant official support, but...

“Hexennacht is a right given to the Rank 1 here, at the forefront of witch history. That is one thing that no country or organization can deny.”

That much was certain.

Yeah, thought Hunter.

“So while we might officially cheer them on, America and Japan’s U.A.H. and political response to Europe is basically, ‘don’t you try anything funny’. Personally, I’ve been getting the occasional footage of European U.A.H.’s Magino Frames, so I’m curious to see the official deployment.”

“How many are there?”

“About 2000.”

“Ohh?” gasped the Rank 3.

This was about European U.A.H., but Hunter still felt somewhat proud.

She guessed Mary’s world had not had that many witch-level fighters.

“Although some of them will go to Russia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America.”

“Oh? It does indeed sound like they are considering the post-Hexennacht power game.”

“So anyway, America’s higher ups only see this Wand Viewing as an annoyance.”

After saying that, Hunter noticed something.

“Ah.”

The surrounding students were focused on them.

I see. So this place is a lot like the world in miniature, realized Kagami.

Witches could be seen as the forefront of indigenous culture and a civilization's secret techniques.

To have them gather here made Shihouin Academy a version of the world in miniature, but at the same time...

"Given who is supporting them and thinking about them, this really is the world in miniature."

Most of the European witches were probably proud of the coming Wand Viewing.

A third force would be supporting Hexennacht in addition to the Ranker Battles and American U.A.H.

In a way, Kagami was grateful.

...But whatever the other countries might want, this place is inviolable.

According to Horinouchi, that was also true for the witches at this academy.

A belated thought occurred to Kagami.

...It must be the same for the witches at Horinouchi's place too.

Leaving their old organizations and becoming maids had been an extension of that inviolability.

I see, she thought while resuming her trash collecting.

"It is still a mystery why Koutarou is with the Horinouchi family, though."

"She says you're a mystery, Head Butler!"

"She says no one needs you around, Head Butler!"

"She says everyone wants you gone, Head Butler!"

"Can you stop making worse and worse assessments of my position here!? I am here because I served Lady Mitsuru's mother!"

"Head Butler, we all know that, so you would need to tell Lady Kagami."

“B-but I’m pretty sure I’ve told her that before! Huh!? Huhhhh!? And if you’re willing to use our equipment to spy on them, why not head out into the open and wait on them!?”

Once the conversation was mostly over, Hunter began picking up more trash.

It was a simple task. As before, she used the metal tongs to pick up trash on the pathway and next to the flower beds and put it inside her garbage bag.

She passed by a few people as she did. Most had filled their garbage bags enough to be on the way to the trash pickup zone by the front gate.

She saw someone wearing an Honors Division hood walking through the flower garden. The girl was always looking after the flowers, so Hunter sort of saw her as part of the background. The student was gathering trash from among the flowers, so Hunter realized all of the students were using the day to clean up after the previous night’s party. And...

“Miss Horinouchi, what do we do about the broken flowers?”

Mary asked that while walking past a flower bed with a clear outline of someone having collapsed there.

...Did someone trip during the party?

Some of them had apparently been drinking alcohol, so that was hardly surprising.

And Horinouchi shook her head.

“The headmaster manages this flower garden, so some divine protections are in effect. A healing divine protection will return the broken flowers to normal. Cleaning up the trash is to ensure the divine protections can flow properly.”

“Lady Headmaster seems to enjoy gardening and flowers.”

“Does she?” asked Hunter.

Kagami pointed to the spell circle open above her shoulder. Her servant was sunbathing inside it, but that was not her point.

“Her spell circles have a flower motif.”

“I remember her showing me a potted plant when I visited her office,” agreed Mary.

Horinouchi agreed while tying up the top of her bag.

“She has pushed for the forestation of Kantou Plain as well.”

Hunter had heard that was a personal matter, but she had also heard it was quite largescale.

“Kantou was mostly torn up during Hexennacht ten years ago, wasn’t it? I hear they ultimately started using spells for soil recovery and a strengthening of the entire plain in north Kantou.”

She had seen the land while riding a fighter from the Atsugi region, but she had also seen giant craters in the Saitama and Ibaraki regions.

“But from what I saw from the air, it hasn’t been very effective.”

“Still, it’s a wonderful thing as long as it is even a little bit effective. That will give people hope. Don’t you think so, Rank 4?”

Mary joined the conversation, but Hunter felt like she was being used as an excuse.

...Sh-she can be such a pain!

Horinouchi understood how Mary felt.

She was unsure whether or not she should get close to others. She felt it would “all be over” if she got too close and drove the other person away, so she tried to keep some distance between them.

Assuming she was not imagining or misunderstanding things, Horinouchi felt the same way at times.

Based on Kagami’s actions, that girl never felt that way at all, but...

...Hunter’s more on Kagami’s end of things.

But Mary was on Horinouchi’s end of things.

It was not just recently that Horinouchi had felt that which “end” someone

was on was determined by how they recovered after a relationship came to a sudden end.

For a long time, she had remembered her mother without making any kind of recovery and she had used that grudge to drive her toward Hexennacht.

Then she had been unsure what to do when an idiot had cried for her.

Mercy was not needed in the Ranker Battles, so there was no room to worry about others. And with her power and excellent grades, she was naturally distanced from the other students.

In the past, she had carried the grudge of her ended relationship and sought Hexennacht.

But someone had cried for her.

There was no pride in having someone cry for her after defeating her.

But to cry was to win.

There was nothing to be done about it.

And when she thought back now, she felt like that moment had returned her to just after that relationship's end. She did not know if that was true or not, but she decided to accept it now because it was convenient.

Believing in uncertain facts was a witch's job.

But she hoped that this really was a fact.

And with that in mind...

...Mary must feel the same way now.

In her case, the end of the relationships had occurred much more recently. It was a fresher wound, so it came to mind more easily. Changing so quickly would be too much to ask, so she ended up keeping her distance.

Looking at it that way, having Kagami by my side in the Buddy System really helped me to recover, thought Horinouchi.

“—————”

...Why am I emphasizing Kagami's presence so much!?

She knew why. It was the same reason kids with no communication skills would grow so attached to anyone who was nice to them. Mary was probably the same there.

But it seemed to Horinouchi that Mary had Hunter too. Based on how Mary had entered the conversation, those two seemed to get along fairly well.

Then she should be fine, thought Horinouchi while walking between the General Division building and the gym to arrive next to the front gate.

They had apparently called professionals from the mainland to pick up the garbage bags. Three garbage trucks with a Kanagawa mark were parked there and a few students were taking the bags from everyone.

Those girls turned around and saw Horinouchi's group.

"...!"

They gave shouts of "Kyah!", "Hyah!", and even the incomprehensible "Uhah!" and then scattered.

Their underclassmen ran away. Some of them added in midair dashes or made a front flip before vanishing into thin air, but Horinouchi simply watched them go.

"What was that about?"

What was so exciting about holding a garbage bag and metal tongs? But Kagami nodded next to her.

"Our costumes last night must have had an effect."

In other words...

"Dressing up as each other makes us look even more like a couple than if we wore matching costumes."

Mary agreed with Kagami.

...That's true!

Exchanging one's possessions was a necessary part of her original world's marriage ritual. Most engagements began with the groom dedicating a number

of things to the bride's family.

When the brigadier general had attended the wedding of one of her field officers...

"I see! This is Nagoya-style, isn't it!? Curse my sister. So we have her half-remembered knowledge of this to thank for the existence of kombu in this world!"

Mary had not understood that, so she had decided not to think about it.

At any rate, those two had left quite an impression the night before.

A holy knight and a shrine maiden were both jobs that served a god.

The others were different. Mary only had to imagine herself or Hunter in place of those two. If a karate fighter or criminal showed up at night and asked to trade clothes with someone, it would clearly be a crime. Any nearby elementary schools would start having the children head home in groups.

But from Horinouchi's point of view...

"What are you talking about!?"

"Oh? Horinouchi, it is not like you to deny something that has already been decided. The internet is already flooded with pictures of the two of us."

Kagami displayed them on a spell circle. After a moment, the Rank 4 commented on them.

"Kagami, you took these yourself, didn't you? I don't know about the anti-curse divine protection on them, though."

"Y-you leaked the ones I placed the anti-curse divine protection on, didn't you!?"

Mary simply found herself writing this off as Kagami being Kagami, but was that a kind of dependence?

Meanwhile, the Rank 4 pointed toward the garbage trucks.

"We're already just standing around, but..."

Oh? You seem to know those two well.

“But why not throw out this trash and go to Horinouchi’s place for a break? You come too, Rank 3.”

...Are you a god!?

But after that brief thought, Mary’s self-control kicked in and another response escaped her lips.

“Don’t decide that for me, Rank 4!”

...She really is a pain...

Not that she’s the only one, thought Hunter as she glared at Horinouchi and Mary.

She pointed at her garbage bag and the garbage truck.

“Well, let’s just think of that as the Rank 3’s habit of arguing with everything. So let’s go throw out this trash, okay?”

“Ho ho? So are you going to take me on after that?”

Mary glared at her. *Damn you’re tall*, thought Hunter, but she knew from their previous fight that her own speed was greater.

Then Horinouchi reached out a hand.

“Hold on.”

But Kagami grabbed that hand from the side.

“Wait a moment, mother.”

“I am not anyone’s mother!”

The underclassmen at the trash pickup zone looked back and nodded, but they avoided commenting on the issue.

But despite all that, Mary looked down at Hunter and spoke.

“We never did settle things between us.”

“Eh? You want to do that again? Or rather, you’re still doing that?”

Instead of answering, Mary raised her garbage bag.

Then she looked at the glove on her hand and narrowed her eyes.

“Let us settle this with the amount of trash we can gather.”

“Oh?” Kagami crossed her arms. “When it comes to gathering trash, Mary’s height allows her to gather things from further away in a single motion! Hunter has a disadvantage there!”

Another voice followed hers. It sounded a lot like the Head Butler.

“Well-....!”

But it vanished for some reason.

Did it come from over here? wondered Hunter as she looked toward the gate, but she did not see him there.

Was she just imagining things?

The maids held Koutarou down behind the front gate.

They had already taken up position here and the Head Maid had spotted Horinouchi and the other girl from behind the gate.

“We drew their attention. Remain as silent as possible as we shift from capture to transportation.”

“Um, what are all of you doing?”

“You can’t tell?”

The Head Maid gave him a serious look and a maid answered while pressing her ear against the ground.

“You were going to say ‘Well done, Lady Mary!’, but she is not yet one of our girls, Head Butler.”

“That’s right,” replied a maid confirming the safety of their escape route on the sidewalk alongside the gate. She used SWAT hand signals to order everyone forward. “Your time on the front line and interacting with her on a daily basis has tricked you into accepting anyone that Lady Mitsuru has opened up to.”

“But in the original sense, a witch is something that lives in your home. ...We

cannot use 'well done' on witches who have not entered the home."

Koutarou reflexively prostrated himself when he heard that.

"Truly...you are truly a master of the Well Done arts!"

"As long as you understand, Head Butler. ...Now, we need to evacuate. If Lady Hunter and Lady Mary fight, it raises the odds of them both ending up as one of ours."

With that, the Head Maid left the edge of the gate.

"...?"

A spell circle appeared next to her face. It was...

"...From my old home."

That would be the German Air Force's 200th Division. It was a communications spell circle bearing the airship mark of the U.A.H.G.L-200, so this was news from the organization she had belonged to.

...What could that be?

Koutarou saw the look on her face change. She immediately looked over as if she could see straight through the gate.

"Head Butler. ...Send instructions to all of the maids. Have them use all of their contacts. And have them gather at the Horinouchi home and the General Division dorm room."

"What is going on?"

The Head Maid turned back, pushed up her glasses, and opened her mouth.

"Schlacht. Something that follows witches everywhere."

Hunter did not look away from Mary.

A message from the 7th Fleet had suddenly arrived in a spell circle next to her face, but it was not a wide-band warning meant to inform her of an emergency. Since she could put it off, she decided to do just that because the current situation was dangerous.

...Are they photographing stuff again?

To ensure she remembered about it, she fixed the coordinate so it would follow along next to her.

Her attention was directed forward. Mary held up her garbage bag with the school gate, the south pier plaza, and Tokyo Bay in the background.

Hunter responded with a shrug.

“Y’know what?”

She did understand why the Rank 3 was acting how she was. Mary had a hook to interact with them, but she had not overcome the barrier yet. That barrier being Hunter, who had been the entrance to the other day’s Ranker Battle.

She likely understood that Hunter, Kagami, and Horinouchi did not want either of them to be higher than the other, but...

...She’s the type that can’t stand for something to be unresolved.

Thanks to her time doing karate, Hunter knew there were people who could only make friends with someone by defeating or losing to them. And based on what she had seen of the Rank 3...

...She isn’t the type that needs to win.

That meant she had left the witch Rankings after losing to Kagami.

In that case, Hunter did not need to treat Mary too carefully. It would be quite nice if defeating her would not make her bitter, and that made Hunter somewhat fond of the Rank 3’s character.

That girl could face forward even when she lost.

However, there was a “but”.

Their conflict would be meaningless. In fact, it could even do damage. Hunter did not know how useful their power would be, but if they were to provide support on Hexennacht, then they were the next line of defense after Kagami and Horinouchi.

...But...

She also had to admit that the Rank 3 probably understood that.

Someone who could face forward even when she lost was stewing over an unresolved outcome, so she was trying to pick a fight. But if she was being realistic about this...

“———”

In that case, thought Hunter with a bitter smile.

“Why has this jobber from another world been hanging out with us all day?”

It was blatant provocation.

...Wh-what is she thinking!?

Horinouchi was confused by Hunter’s harsher than usual comment. And just when it had looked like Hunter was managing to get closer to them, too.

Had something been building up inside Hunter until she snapped? The public TV show “Try and Be Gay”^[1] had mentioned that eating nothing but meat gave you a shorter temper. Hunter had been watching it with them and she had had this to say:

“What about the people who don’t eat meat but still lose their temper at the drop of a hat and attack at full power?”

...Thinking back, why did she ask me that with such a serious look on her face?

Regardless, the situation was underway. Mary nodded at Hunter’s provocation.

“I see.”

But Horinouchi noticed something about her expression as she nodded.

...Oh?

She was smiling. Her eyebrows were raised, but there was no harshness there. And...

“What is this American stalking horse saying when she’s ranked lower than me?”

...Yes.

Horinouchi saw Mary and Hunter throw their garbage bags at each other again.

Hunter reached forward and grabbed one and Mary swung her hand outwards to snatch the other. Hunter spoke when she saw Mary lightly spin her bag around.

“Oh? Oh? You wanna do this?”

“No, I am fine with giving you Rank 3.”

“Eh? You’ll really give it to me!?”

“Yes, once the Brigadier General and Miss Horinouchi are Rank 1, I will be Rank 2 and you will be Rank 3.”

“Okay, it’s on now!”

Horinouchi wondered why that last line had been in the Kansai dialect, but she guessed it was some kind of karate skill. At any rate, the two of them seemed to understand this was a verbal battle and not a physical one.

Or if it *was* to be physical, it would be through the medium of exams or trash collecting. So...

...Mary understands too.

Even if she was stewing, the girl knew her purpose here and would avoid any pointless battles. She would stick to the kind of conflict common in everyday life.

That may have just been how witch arguments worked.

And Mary had chosen to remain near them.

She had to have a number of thoughts on losing her home, but she was here because she was suppressing them and thinking about what mattered most now.

So Hunter responded in kind.

Instead of being meaninglessly mature, she approached Mary with an attitude that allowed her to respond to those arguments at any time.

Being “understanding” of Mary would only distance her. After all, they stood at different positions. Mary was still stewing, but the rest of them had accepted everything as they faced Hexennacht.

Mary wanted to be the same, but she could not. However, kindly ignoring that would only hurt her.

Hunter was not ignoring all that.

“I’m ready to go whenever you are.”

Hunter was likely the only one taking on that kind of behavior so she could accept it all. They had already determined Mary’s position in relation to them.

...That’s our relationship.

Mary understood that too. The two of them faced each other but then they both looked Horinouchi and Kagami’s way.

“Kagami.”

“Miss Horinouchi.”

Kagami tossed her garbage bag to Hunter and Horinouchi handed hers to Mary.

And then...

“———”

A wind passed between and below the two garbage bags.

Oh? thought Kagami.

When did she get so close?

It was a student in a Shihouin Academy uniform. The short girl hid her face with her hood and she passed between them with a quick footwork.

She took the very shortest route.

That was partially due to their position right in front of the garbage trucks in the trash pickup zone.

Passing between them was more direct than circling around them.

But something caught Kagami's attention.

...She did not act like we were in the way, did she?

It had been natural.

Her running steps had danced between them like leaves floating down a river.

But it was not quite right to say she had danced between them either. She had simply passed between them.

There had been no resistance or obstacles to her movements or landing.

Hunter caught the garbage bag the girl had passed below and turned back toward Kagami. It was obvious what the look in her eyes said.

"You want to eat katsudon, don't you?"

"I was thinking those movements went beyond light!"

By the time those words reached Kagami, the hooded girl was leaving her trash with the garbage collector. And...

"That girl..." said Horinouchi as she left her garbage bag with Mary. "She's the Honors Division student who was looking after the flower garden before."

The girl left her trash with the garbage truck and turned back toward the four witches walking up behind her.

Her hood hid her face.

But the four witches each stepped aside to open the way.

The girl must have known what they meant because she used her "passing through" way of walking to lightly sway her body while her feet carried her straight through.

She used the forward and back motion of her body to walk forward not too fast and not too slow.

"———"

She simply walked straight through and toward the flower garden on the north end of the courtyard.

“That really did go beyond just light. Not that she was floating or anything.”

Hunter commented on the girl as she left two bags with the garbage collector.

...That's different than me.

She based her actions on her footing, so her footsteps tended to be loud. She could silence them if she wanted to, but that would change her standard movements.

She had only seen for a moment, but she could guess some things from the hooded girl's movements.

“Is she an elemental type?”

Like wind or something. She probably used spells associated with a natural element. But...

“Were we just being careless for her to get that close without any of us noticing?”

“That's a good question,” said Horinouchi with a bitter smile.

They were answered by a quiet laugh.

It came from the garbage collector who had taken their bags. She sat on top of the garbage truck and was probably a witch. She wore a sanitation department jumpsuit, but she held a broom under one arm and stroked it like a cat.

She looked into the distance between the General Division building and the gym. Hunter looked in the same direction and saw someone walking north.

The girl's movements looked unremarkable from this distance, but...

“That girl is always like that,” said the garbage collector witch. “Every single day.”

The driver gave his own comment while closing the tailgate to compress the garbage bags.

“She brings the withered flowers and rotten stakes from the flower garden. ... All of a sudden we find her standing there.”

“I was right,” said Horinouchi. “She really is the one always looking after the flowers. I believe she’s in the Honors Division’s third year.”

“She’s a quiet girl. I’ve never heard her speak,” said the witch on top of the garbage truck. “And I don’t think I’ve ever seen her with a servant either. But how should I put it? ...I can’t even feel one’s presence.”

She doesn’t show her servant? thought Hunter with her curiosity piqued.

A servant was necessary to summon a Frame. There was an exception standing right next to her, but she refused to let there be another.

...So is she hiding her servant or is there no point in bringing hers out?

Kagami raised her right hand.

“Is it possible to never bring out a servant?”

Hearing that, Hunter and Mary both looked above Horinouchi’s shoulder.

The Suzaku had appeared on its own and it was reading a horse racing newspaper. But when it noticed them...

“...”

It silently entered its spell circle.

After what was clearly the sound of a door shutting, the spell circle vanished and its owner frantically waved her hands back and forth.

“U-um, it’s been passed down for generations, so it’s an adult! It’s allowed to gamble!”

“What kind of explanation is that?”

“Well, Dikaio also shows up without being called for.”

“My Macabre is generally out because I always keep my Magino Frame active. It hides so as not to eat up too much power, though.”

Hunter’s Hedgehog was much the same.

There were of course times when a servant was not evident, but...

...I’m not sure I could keep that up every day.

Also...

“You can’t sense one?”

She asked the witch on top of the garbage truck.

The witch nodded with the afternoon sun behind her.

“Right. That kind of thing is important for my job.”

“That’s right,” said the driver as he leaned inside through the passenger-side sliding door. The witch on top raised a hand toward Hunter and a spell circle appeared on the back of the truck. It was likely for a barrier spell.

Garbage produced where witches lived could be unknowingly affected by spells, so this would seal that away. This was necessary because the trash dump was outside the school.

...Back home, Tuesday was the day for spell-related trash.

Sometimes the dumpster would set on fire and sometimes it would grow legs and run away.

But according to this witch who could detect ether in the trash...

“I wonder if she really doesn’t have a servant.”

“Well, there are a number of styles and the Honors Division is for the more unique ones.”

“But wouldn’t she have trouble in battle without being able to summon a Frame?”

“That might be why she’s in the Honors Division.”

Hunter had to admit that was a good point.

“The Honors Division isn’t so much for the highly skilled as it is for users of highly unique one-off spells.”

“Then,” said Hunter while thinking about what happened before. “Was it dangerous to let her get that close?”

“If she was a Ranker, I suppose,” said Kagami.

“Even with a surprise attack, pseudo-passive reflexive defenses are standard,

aren't they?" asked Horinouchi. "I kept my right hand free."

Hunter was shocked.

"Um, but..." said Hunter as she faced away from them.

Kagami had to agree.

"I was on the left and you were on the right, Horinouchi. And you were handing Mary the bag with your left hand, so were you planning to shoot without letting your opponent see your right hand?"

"You need to subconsciously prepare yourself in case something happens."

I would expect no less, thought Kagami as Horinouchi glanced over at her.

"But I think you noticed her first."

"Because she moved along our current of motion."

"Our...current?" asked Mary.

"A trace of your presence is found along the line of your motion," explained Kagami. "It is like your hair blowing in the wind. And when someone is purposefully following that, it is quite noticeable."

"Following that?"

"I believe it was the wind or something similar."

That girl had been drawn in by their walking motion. She likely used a light step normally, but when she approached some other "motion", she was drawn in yet did not fight it.

By not resisting it, she followed that current and moved forward.

That was how she had slipped between them.

She had not interfered in their actions.

"In a way, it is a method of piercing something without interfering with it. Although it still felt like she was getting in our way because she was using our movements."

"Is she the evasive type?" asked Mary.

Kagami had to agree on that point.

“Of course, if she can evade, she can also circle around you or make a surprise attack. She can turn her evasion into an attack. Although Hunter would be our expert on footwork.”

“She wouldn’t be able to turn that movement into the solid footing needed for a powerful blow.”

“True enough,” replied Kagami just as the garbage collector witch spoke from the top of the truck.

“Everything looks dangerous to the upper Rankers at this time, doesn’t it?”

She laughed as the garbage truck started to move. It drove forward, made a U-turn, and then drove on the road to Tokyo.

Kagami saw the next garbage truck approaching and Horinouchi noticed some people behind them.

“More people are coming. ...Let’s wash our hands and then go to my room.”

“Lady Mitsuru has announced she is returning!”

“And Lady Mary is coming with her! Now we can use ‘well done’ on her too!”

“Wait, everyone!” shouted Koutarou as he quickly climbed over the wall surrounding the academy. “We have a more pressing matter! We must inform Lady Mitsuru!”

“But, um, Head Butler?”

“What is it!? What could be wrong with informing Lady Mitsuru of this urgent news!?”

“This school’s walls have an anti-intruder barrier set up and the warning just dropped below three seconds.”

He looked up and saw the number on the spell circle.

It was zero.

Mary heard what sounded like a lightning strike far to the southeast.

...I wonder what that was about.

Well, these things happen a lot, she decided. In the Spell Division, lab walls were blown down at a rate of two or three a week.

But aside from that, the fact that she had been called to Horinouchi's room held important meaning.

...Does that mean she's accepted me as one of them!?

Based on how Horinouchi had invited her, the girl had likely already seen it that way.

"Thank you very much."

When Mary bowed, Horinouchi's shoulders shook and she turned around.

"Wh-what for?"

"Mary is very polite about these things," said Kagami. "But you are quite generous, Horinouchi. You even let me borrow one of your rooms."

"Not only do you invite people over, but you just moved in without asking!"

Mary just about asked "Isn't that being a little too loose?", but she decided not to when she remembered Horinouchi's true name. That forbidden word could easily be used against her.

...She truly is frightening!

Shinto was frightening indeed.

At any rate, Mary followed Horinouchi to take her up on her offer.

But then the Rank 4 raised her right hand.

"Oh, hey. ...They're starting something interesting."

"What?"

Mary looked back to find the Rank 4 opening a video spell circle, but...

"What...?"

"...is that?" finished Kagami.

“Well,” said Horinouchi. “That looks like the European U.A.H. Wand Viewing we discussed earlier.”

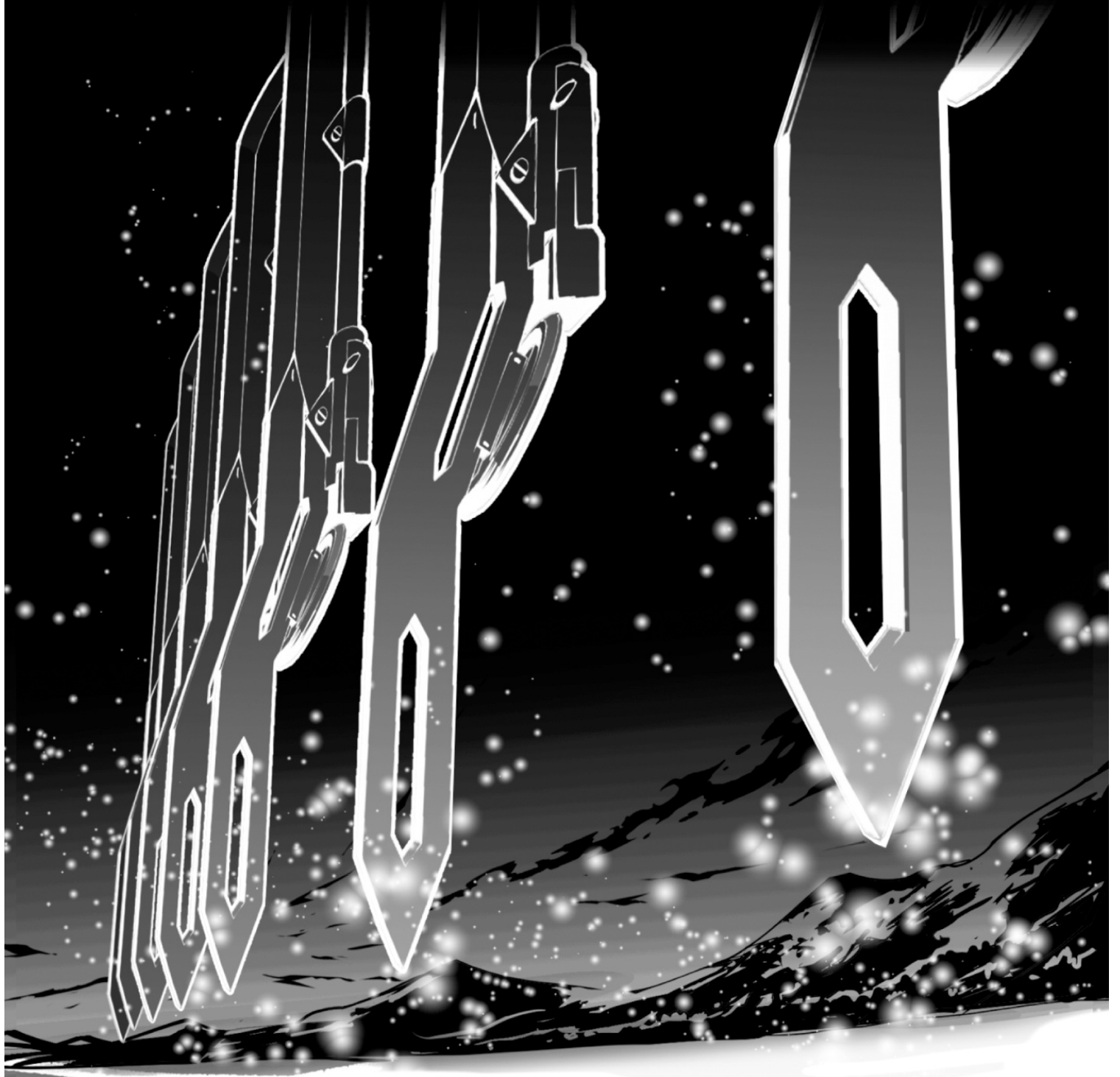
Translator's Notes and References

1. [↑](#) Parody of the Japanese cooking show Tameshite Gatten.

Chapter 5: That is an Illusion

Chapter 5

“That is an Illusion”



The world's bonds
Can come from anywhere
And in any form

The world's bonds

Can come from anywhere

And in any form

Koutarou saw the image superimposed on the sky.

He lay on the grass just outside the wall on Shihouin Academy's southeast side.

Earlier, he had triggered the security system by carelessly crossing the wall and had been hit by a lightning strike, so he could not move.

The maids sat around him, but...

"Oh, tell us when you can move again. We'll be having a tea party."

He moved just his fingertips to send a report to academy security.

"The previous alarm and lightning strike were nothing to worry about. I was merely performing a test."

He did not specify what kind of test.

He simply watched the spell circle next to the tea party until his body's tuning divine protection kicked in.

He watched the European U.A.H. Wand Viewing with a few doubts in his mind.

...What is this?

Below a colorless sky, he saw a location surrounded by forests and mountains.

It was a vast space.

More than just an airfield, an entire city's worth of space had been cleared.

It was made of rock.

Based on the sunshine, it was an elevated region. A tall forest surrounded it on the south, east, and west while a mountain range rose to the north. The mountains formed a right angle because the cleared area had been made level.

The cutting of the mountain was strange.

A straight line had been cut into the rocky base of the mountain as smoothly as

slicing tofu.

The cut had to be over 30 km long and its height exceeded 2 km in places.

But as far as Koutarou could tell from the footage, the cut was a perfectly straight line. A waterfall spilled from a gap in the layers of rock and it flowed into an artificial river below the cut, but the scale was too large to grasp.

“Lady Lueger created that on her own. She said she wanted somewhere where the other U.A.H. leaders and the politicians couldn’t interfere and she created it in a single night,” explained a European maid who was brewing tea on a travel sheet spread out on the grass. “Lisbeth Lueger is one of the Troika and the German representative. She is also currently the strongest witch who returned to Europe and supported that land after all the other witches left.”

She seemed to remember something else.

“Oh, and she gets mad with a smile on her face if you talk about her age.”

“Precisely,” said an unexpected voice from the footage. “As long as you remember, Green Moon. Your skill was lacking, but I see you haven’t forgotten what I scolded you over.”

...Eh?

The footage was not a two-way transmission and it was supposedly being broadcast worldwide via satellite. But the Head Maid commented while pulling a sandwich baguette out of a midair spell circle.

“Women can always hear you when you spread rumors about them, Head Butler. This is the same as Lady Kagami and Lady Mitsuru noticing when they are being monitored from satellite orbit.”

“Can she not notice you, Head Maid?”

“I am not spreading rumors.”

Women are scary, realized Koutarou, but that thought was immediately thrown from his mind.

He saw movement in the footage.

Koutarou saw ranks of witches.

The witches in the clearing wore black Normal Frames as per the ancient legends.

But those ranks were spread incredibly far apart. The witches were each about 300 meters from each other while lined up in rows and columns. But given how wide the clearing was, even at that distance apart...

“We have a primary force of 2000 here.”

Blowing wind accompanied the voice from the footage. It felt like a cold wind, but that may have been because it was the north wind blowing down from the dry mountains. Now, what were those 2000 U.A.H. members going to do?

...Will they summon Magino Frames?

That was supposedly the number of mass-produced Magino Frames they had.

And a voice spoke a single word from the footage.

“Start.”

Immediately, light appeared in the dully colored clearing. It appeared in the hands of the witches.

“Normal Devices.”

“That’s right.”

“They’re gunblades. Are they like Lady Kagami’s?”

“Single-edged? They look a bit like kitchen knives.”

As the maids commented, black blades appeared in the hands of the spread-out 2000.

They were straight, single-edged swords and they were non-transforming types with a built in cannon. But...

“They have a combined power system and it looks like the main engine has been reinforced.”

“So they can’t move while firing?”

“They’ve gotta move for themselves. More importantly...”

Koutarou knew what they were going to say next.

The 2000 had raised the swords in front of their eyes as if praying.

Then far, far more ether light than before exploded into the sky.

“That was fast...!?”

“Eh? They didn’t have to build up their mood first!?”

The maids’ surprise was to be expected.

...They can rapidly move from Normal to Magino like Lady Hunter!?

That was exactly what was summoned into the dry sky.

2000 straight, single-edged swords were drawn into the colorless sky.

Hunter gasped a little.

...They’re really showing off.

They had rapidly summoned their Magino Frames immediately after summoning their Normal Frames. Normally, that required heating up their Phlogiston Heart in their Normal Frame for a stepped increase.

It was possible to prepare a keyword for increasing their willpower and to keep their Phlogiston Heart perpetually and stably heated for a quick Magino summoning.

But this was different from that.

“It’s how they’ve split up the engines.”

“You know what they did, Hunter!?”

“Why pass this off to her?” asked Horinouchi while glaring at Kagami, but Hunter did not mind.

Hunter spread her arms to either side to indicate a straight gesture and then pointed near the center.

“They have a large engine here that’s probably for both firing and propulsion.”

“The same engine handles both of those?” asked Mary with a tilt of her head.

Her Magino Frame's annihilation spell was powerful, but the Frame's mobility was unimpressive and its armor was thin. According to Mary...

"Generally, a Device has three different engines: one for attack, one for movement, and one for defense. Which one receives the most focus determines the majority of a Device's characteristics."

"Right," replied Hunter. "When the Form and Device – combined into the Frame – grow large and complicated, the power needed also grows. That means they need separate power for attack, movement, and defense. That also requires heating up your Phlogiston Heart for all three. But..."

She pointed at the base of the Magino Frame barrels on the footage.

"What happens if you only have two?"

Kagami crossed her arms and answered.

"The three categories of attack, movement, and defense become the two categories of (attack + movement) and defense?"

"Yes. Their attack and movement systems are linked. That requires only two areas for heating up your Phlogiston Heart. But since they can create an engine large enough for twice the capacity, it can really help heat up their Phlogiston Heart. ...That's probably what we just saw."

"Why have the rest of us not been doing that?"

"If you combine your power source for attack and movement, you can't move while attacking and you can't attack while moving," answered Horinouchi. "Of course, you can always send some excess power over, but that is dangerous in battle."

"I see. In other words..." The corners of Kagami's mouth rose. "These Magino Frames are specialized for two things: sniping the Black Witch and her minions that descend from the moon and ramming right into them without firing."

That is a ridiculous idea, thought Horinouchi.

"These were mass-produced, but I doubt they would stand a chance if they fought inside the Black Witch's seal. Their range of tactics is too limited."

“Then why produce so many of them?”

“You do not understand, Mary?”

When Kagami said that, she and Horinouchi turned toward Hunter.

And Hunter shrugged.

“This is what European U.A.H. is thinking: The witch in Japan can fight the Black Witch however she likes, but we will use these 2000 Magino Frames to defend Europe.”

“In other words,” said Horinouchi. “After Hexennacht, they will let Japan take the honor of having fought the Black Witch, but Europe will be the unscathed land that can rule the world afterwards. Is that what you mean?”

If so, it painted this Wand Viewing in a new light.

“Is this European U.A.H.’s way of stepping away from Hexennacht?”

“It is not,” answered Kagami.

Horinouchi turned toward her.

“What do you mean? Don’t you think it would be difficult to oppose the Black Witch with these Magino Frames?”

“Do they have an ace witch by any chance? Oh, maybe that old lady who has been speaking?”

“What did you just say?” replied the voice in question.

Hunter glared at the footage and Horinouchi raised an index finger in front of her nose.

...That’s the kind of person she is, isn’t it?

But she was still bothered by what Kagami had said.

“Are you saying that member of the Troika is going to join the Ranker Battles?”

“No, they would not need to do that. European U.A.H. has a simpler way of joining Hexennacht.”

As Kagami said that, something happened in the footage.

The 2000 black swords had their blade tips raised toward the center of the

heavens and those tips began to glow.

They were spell circles.

“Yes. That is the right answer.”

Horinouchi heard Kagami speak and she saw light in the center of her vision.

The spell circles opened on the 2000 sword tips joined together to form a single giant circle.

...They're combining their power!?

Not all of them had done so. It was only the 1000 in the center. But the spell circle stretched to more than 5 km across and a word appeared in the center.

<JUMP>

It was a movement spell, but not one that carried something over a distance. All of that power was being poured into...

“A teleportation jump!?”

More than one part of that seemed impossible to Horinouchi.

Teleportation spells were well known as witch spells. They moved objects not by carrying them or by shifting their location. Instead, they altered their location. These spatial jumps or distortions were powerful movement spells, but they were also known for another factor.

Their restrictions and necessary conditions were very strict.

After all, to link two points in space, the spell had to affect both “here” and “there”.

That meant activating a spell somewhere you were not.

It meant doing something somewhere other than where you were.

“Is that difficult even for the witches of this world?” asked Kagami.

“Can you eat or study in a place you aren’t?” asked Horinouchi. “Magic is what allows us to do things like that, but altering the location of objects is very difficult.”

The accuracy and power needed grew immensely as the distance increased, so...

“Most teleportation spells are limited to the user’s field of vision or they need a ‘receiver’ at the other end.”

The former was a short-range teleportation. The latter was the stereotypical type of spell known as a “gate”. A location or partner acted as a physical focal point to link the teleportation spell.

Horinouchi herself had done something similar to a gate a few days before.

“Miss Horinouchi, when you used your Cave Opening on the annihilation spell I used for high-speed movement, you did something similar to this. I automatically acted as your ‘receiver’.”

But what they saw here was different.

European U.A.H. intended to send the 1000 blades somewhere.

“Are they bringing these identical Magino Frames together and synchronizing them to use a spell that requires immense power?” asked Kagami.

“And it required the sacrifice of simplifying their attack and mobility into one,” added Horinouchi before addressing another of the impossibilities she had thought of. “But where are they planning to send the blades!?”

“That is simple,” said a witch’s voice.

It did not only come from the transmission footage.

It descended from the sky surrounding Shihouin Academy in every direction.

“Right there. To the new school for witches.”

A moment later, 1000 blades measuring 50m surrounded Shihouin Academy.

The witches watching the footage were slow to notice.

The 1000 blades had vanished from below the teleportation spell as it burst and scattered.

But none of them imagined those swords had all arrived in the sky around them.

They first felt it as a wind.

Thick masses of air pushed in at them from every direction. And when they turned their gazes against the whipping air currents, they saw what was there.

The blades were lined up vertically in the sky.

1000 straight swords surrounded the academy as if preparing to slice into it.

“Lady Mitsuru.”

Horinouchi viewed the 1000 swords surrounding them like an open-top dome.

She also heard Koutarou’s voice over a transmission spell.

“Lady Mitsuru, you know that a number of countries have troops stationed in Japan to prepare for Hexennacht, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I think we know that.”

Hunter opened a spell circle in annoyance, but the external transmission spell circle grew distorted.

...Interference.

The surrounding Magino Frames linked together their barriers to create a “wall” blocking any communications.

The mainland should have been visible from here, but it seemed to be shimmering.

If light was being distorted too, then it was adequate defense for a Magino Device. Their attack and movement were linked, but defense seemed to have its own independent power source.

...Honestly.

She sensed the presences and heard the sounds of the surrounding students moving and raising their guard. Some of those witches would be from Europe.

But at the moment...

“Everyone has fortified our defenses!”

Mary had connected to the school network to grasp everyone’s actions.

Her Spell Division contained a lot of Europeans, so if they were working to fight this...

“Was this an independent action on European U.A.H.’s part?”

“Yes, Lady Kagami,” answered Koutarou.

“In that case,” said Horinouchi. “The other nations are generally in charge of protecting us here and of taking the defensive role during Hexennacht, right? Why would they be doing this now?”

Hunter took issue with that dismissive description, but Koutarou had more to say.

“Well, this is very hard to say, Lady Mitsuru,” explained Horinouchi’s Head Butler who was in charge of liaison work. “But the European nations are demanding administrative authority over Shihouin Academy. ...They say it is to manage the execution of Hexennacht and the selection of the witch who will take part.”

“Ho ho?” said Kagami with a nod.

Since that did not worry Horinouchi, her thoughts were probably accurate.

In other words, she added in her heart before speaking.

“Is this what you were talking about before, Kagami?”

“Hexennacht is no more than a political card to these nations.”

Kagami sounded entirely bored with it all.

...Not that I want her to enjoy this...

Did that mean this had not exceeded her predictions?

Kagami then pointed her thumb back toward the main gate behind her.

Horinouchi knew what that meant. After surrounding them so noticeably, their opponent would arrive through the proper entrance.

“But don’t witches like using the back door?” asked Horinouchi.

“This is politics.”

Horinouchi was calm enough to shrug that off with a “well, whatever” and she picked up her pace.

But as they walked emptyhanded toward the main gate, Kagami spoke with her back to Horinouchi.

“If the Black Witch is indeed defeated, the successful witch’s country will have a large advantage over the other countries.”

She sounded just as disinterested as before, but Horinouchi responded while moving up alongside her.

“You mean in influence and military power, right?”

“Military power?” asked Mary a step behind them.

The answer came from outside the group. It was Koutarou.

“Yes, that is right. To defeat the Black Witch is to create a threat greater than the Black Witch.”

“Ever since the middle ages, the witches of this world have been accepted as a legitimate military force,” added Horinouchi.

Mary had come from another world, so it must have seemed odd to her even if she had the knowledge.

“It may not be as obvious in Japan since witches gathered here after crossing national borders and it is especially hard to tell here in Shihouin Academy, but since they still have to focus on national borders in Europe, they have a tendency of viewing a powerful witch as a weapon.”

“That is exactly right, Lady Mitsuru. ...And I believe this incident comes directly from that viewpoint.”

“Then,” began Kagami. “Those nations are attempting to supervise us because we have yet to settle those issues?”

“It would seem so, Lady Kagami.”

Hunter raised her hand when she heard that.

She looked up into the sky and finally sped up her slowing feet.

“Oh, looks like my people are taking the academy’s side.”

“Are you talking about that light in the southwest sky?” asked Kagami.

“A lunar surveillance F-18 ascended vertically and is sending an optical transmission this way.”

“Morse code? Won’t European U.A.H. notice?”

“No, this is the 7th Fleet’s personal code. There’s no cracking it because it’s based on the number of letters in the behavioral standards form that changes weekly. And the standards form is handwritten by the second-in-command, so bad things will happen if an unauthorized person reads it. ...Right now they’re stopped at Hawaii and they can apparently leave to hold the other nations in check once their preparations are complete.”

Hunter’s spell circle displayed the communications that had supposedly been blocked. It had been sent to her by the 7th Fleet that supported her, but...

“The header says ‘Watch this, European U.A.H.’ and the attachment is the official specs of those Magino Devices floating there,” explained Hunter. “Look at this. It says they have three main engines. And they even sent out a test wand just like that. They made us all think this was the normal design.”

So they set us up, realized Kagami with a bitter laugh.

Seeing this world fighting itself like this made her wonder if her sister’s personality had grown even worse. But...

“The fact that they would set all this up to give themselves even a slight advantage in a later age may be proof of how rich a world this is.”

“I’m not sure if that’s self-flagellation or a compliment,” commented Horinouchi.

“I am merely impressed. In a way, this is a moving scene. And I take it Hunter’s people will be responding to this.”

“But won’t that just confuse the situation further?”

“Probably.” Hunter crossed her arms. “Makes you wonder why they’re just stirring up the embers.”

Meanwhile, they arrived at the main gate again. A few people were standing beyond it.

...*Witches.*

The witches in black Magino Forms were older than Kagami’s group.

She realized this was her first time seeing witches not affiliated with Shihouin Academy.

She had flown over America during the battle with Hunter, but she had not run across any local witches. She had assumed that was a “gap” in the world her sister had created, but...

“There are some.”

Once she said that, Horinouchi held out her right hand to stop them.

“Do you have something to say as Student Council President?”

“No, someone else wants to speak first.”

As Horinouchi spoke, spell circles appeared all across the sky above the academy.

The witch communication devices blossomed all around them and in all parts of the academy. They were shaped like flowers.

“Lady Headmaster?”

That was exactly who they displayed: the headmaster. She was likely looking south from her office’s window. The room provided the background and the footage was shot from a somewhat low angle as she spoke to everyone.

“I must warn you.”

This was a simple rejection.

“Set foot in my academy and you will be deemed an enemy. Do you understand, European U.A.H.?”

...She just defined her opponent.

Defining a phenomenon to understand and grasp it is how witches use power, thought Horinouchi. That was why the headmaster named her opponent and warned the surrounding Magino Frames.

“My academy is inviolable. I believe we promised as much ten years ago... Lisbeth.”

She spoke a name.

Yes, Horinouchi could see that person. The witches in front of the main gate split apart and a single individual approached.

It was a tall woman.

She wore a black cape, hat, and boots. An eyepatch covered her right eye. Her hair had some gray mixed in, but her face did not look aged at all.

Horinouchi’s mother would have been the same age had she still been alive. And Horinouchi naturally accepted that fact as she spoke.

“Come any closer and you will be deemed an enemy, Aunt Lisbeth.”

“...Mitsuru.”

Lisbeth stopped as if she had only just now noticed her.

She was right in front of the gate.

“Long time no see. And do not call me ‘aunt’.”

Hunter took a deep breath behind Horinouchi and whispered a question.

“Kagami, who’s the old lady?”

“I do not know, but this woman, who is clearly past her thirties, is most likely an important individual.”

“Um, you two? Why not be nice and stick to ‘older than us, but possibly at double our score’?”

...She can hear all three of you!

As Horinouchi thought that, a voice arrived from straight ahead. It started as a quiet laugh.

“I can hear you, Ranker girls.”

Lisbeth also held up a spell circle that displayed a document.

“I am U.A.H. Representative Lisbeth Lueger. Based on U.A.H.’s decision, I have arrived to place Shihouin Academy under our protection.”

...So that really is what this is about.

Kagami and the others had been right.

“The witches of the world view Shihouin Academy as the site of their decisive battle and a facility to train in, so we have decided we must protect this academy while you are determining who will take Rank 1.”

This really was what Kagami had mentioned, but...

“European U.A.H. is trying to control Hexennacht like this, isn’t it?”



Mary nodded in agreement with Horinouchi, and...

...This means they see who controls the world as a problem in addition to the Black Witch.

Kagami stood a half step ahead and she asked Horinouchi a quiet question.

“How strong is she?”

She was referring to the witch named Lisbeth who stood in front of the main gate.

...She is very skilled, isn't she?

Mary could tell at a glance. And that was without any kind of observation spell.

The uniform the woman wore was likely a Normal Form, but it truly was clothing.

It was not panels as soft as cloth or something that simply took that “form”. Ether formed threads which were woven together into a uniform.

The higher Rankers could do that much, but each piece of this woman’s uniform was made differently. They all used different thicknesses and colors of thread.

“Brigadier general.”

“Yes. She is a uniform fetishist. I sense great skill in her....”

Horinouchi clenched the fist behind her back so hard the veins bulged out, but Mary understood she was not trying to tell her anything.

Horinouchi did, however, look back over her shoulder to glare at Kagami.

“She is the third witch who formed the Troika with my mother and the headmaster during the previous Hexennacht. My mother died during Hexennacht, but the headmaster created Shihouin Academy and Aunt Lis-...Miss Lisbeth helped construct the modern form of U.A.H. She is now the German representative.”

“In other words, she was the Rank 2 or 3 a decade ago? ...But how strong is she now?”

A voice answered Kagami from beyond the main gate.

“Rushing to action will accomplish nothing, current Rank 2.”

Lisbeth followed up those words by looking into the sky. Her smile may have shown approval of their behavior.

And with that smile intact, she spoke to the headmaster.

“We have no time, Cerisier. Transfer control of the academy to me.”

“That will not be necessary, Lisbeth.”

Mary saw a quick reaction to the headmaster’s response.

Lisbeth’s expression changed.

The headmaster had essentially rejected her, but...

...That wasn’t anger.

The ends of her eyebrows had lowered just for a moment.

Mary saw the shift in Lisbeth’s expression.

It looked like hesitation or displeasure at the rejection, but it soon vanished.

A moment later, she opened her mouth with her eyebrows raised. Her gaze was powerful as she glared at a spell circle in the sky.

“But Cerisier...”

Was she protesting or persuading? They never found out because someone else suddenly appeared.

“Lisbeth.”

As the headmaster spoke, a small form descended from the sky behind the spell circle.

The girl wore a pink Normal Form and wielded a hoe-shaped Device. She landed between Mary’s group and Lisbeth.

Her back was thin and slender, but the strangest aspect was her face.

...A mask?

Perhaps to hide her face, the girl wore a gas mask.

And her movements were hard to follow after she straightened back up from landing.

Her movements were smooth and felt perfectly natural, so Mary began to speak.

“Miss Horinouchi.”

“You set foot inside,” said the headmaster at the same time.

It had likely been when Lisbeth’s expression had changed, but she had taken a half step inside the gate.

And the pink girl moved to punish that action.

“———”

She rushed forward.

Chapter 6: Rejection Arrives Without Warning

Chapter 6

“Rejection Arrives Without Warning”



Slap the surface

To make a nice noise

Koutarou saw an instantaneous exchange of offense and defense.

...Has it started!?

The maids had called off their tea party and scattered to various points within the academy. A few of them continued the tea party, but that was a diversion against the surveillance from the surrounding Magino Devices. Koutarou and one of the maids (a Latina witch from South America who specialized in stealth) were rushing toward the main gate.

The maid kept her stealth spell active and held it up like a cloak as she spoke.

“This jaguar-style spell can erase my footsteps, but it honestly won’t work against something on that level.”

“That is fine. As long as I can confirm the situation-...”

He trailed off as offense and defense intersected 40 meters away.

The gas mask girl, who had a pink Normal Frame with what seemed to be a flower motif, rushed at Lisbeth.

It was timed to catch Lisbeth by surprise and Koutarou only noticed it once she stood up after landing.

She reached forward while standing and swung her hoe-shaped Device forward. But...

...That isn’t going to hit!

The hoe could only manifest its power along the path of the swing. Mary’s scythe could slice the things on the inside edge, but a hoe only effected things along the path of the blade itself.

Why would she use something like that here?

...Is she a reckless warrior for justice!?

As expected, the attack did not hit.

But a row of objects appeared along the path of the hoe.

They were flowers.

“What is that?”

“Please get down, Head Butler!”

Just as his head was held further down, the ether flowers that blossomed over an arc began to scatter into the wind.

Immediately, light and power appeared straight ahead.

“Those are explosion spells!”

A chain reaction of explosive light covered a radius of three meters between Lisbeth and the girl.

Kagami saw Lisbeth’s reaction.

She found it interesting because the woman did not fall back.

The European U.A.H. witch simply swung her right hand. That light upward snap brought something into existence.

...A straight sword device!

It only took a moment.

But the blade did not hit the expanding arc of explosive light as it approached her.

The blade tip produced a path of bluish-black light.

“What is that?”

“That is Aunt Lisbeth’s spatial cutting!”

“You are a knowledgeable girl, Horinouchi!”

That was exactly what happened. The explosive light and power were sliced in two before reuniting and exploding behind Lisbeth who was covered in a slight bluish-black shadow.

...Oh.

Kagami heard something. Power was bursting and the ground was shaking, but Lisbeth's surroundings remained entirely uneventful, as if she were contained inside an invisible scabbard.

The explosive flowers' ether petals scattered through the air and the wind whipped them up a little later.

Then Lisbeth moved forward. She held her sword upside down as she did so.

Immediately, the gas mask girl swung her hand.

Ashes spread gently through the air. And as ether light surrounded them...

"Flowers again!?"

Just as Lisbeth swung her sword upwards, another series of explosions occurred.

Their density was even greater than before, which meant...

...That gas mask girl's Phlogiston Heart is heating up!

But as the flowers scattered and the wind actually reached her this time, Lisbeth spoke.

"A flower spell...!"

After confirming that her opponent was using a spell with a flower motif, Lisbeth continued.

"That spell is Cerisier's-..."

She was not able to finish her question.

The girl cut her off after taking a quick step back.

"The Rank 1."

It was a quiet, restrained voice. And after a breath, she concluded her thought.

"That's me."

Horinouchi shuddered when she heard the gas mask girl.

...So that really is what's going on here!?

This girl had attacked after the headmaster's announcement, so she was clearly working for the headmaster.

The Rank 1's identity was not publicly known, but the headmaster knew.

That had been a worrying fact.

Horinouchi had wondered if the Rank 1 and the headmaster were connected in some way.

If the Rank 1 was a powerful individual who could act on the headmaster's behalf when instructed to, it changed the meaning of keeping her identity hidden.

...But...

The series of events playing out here and the headmaster's instructions had revealed something.

The Rank 1 witch was indeed under the headmaster's control.

"...Horinouchi."

Kagami seemed to understand the same thing. Horinouchi knew perfectly well why she had called her name.

Horinouchi was the Student Council President.

Her job was to gather the students' opinions as their representative, convey them to the headmaster, teachers, and administrators, and return to the students with the decision they made.

The headmaster could be seen as her enemy and the headmaster had just made her stance clear. But what was Horinouchi supposed to do as a student? Just as she began to make that decision...

"Horinouchi."

Kagami had walked up to her side and grabbed her right hand.

"You are the final boss of the students, so you cannot be in the very front, now can you?"

Lisbeth Lueger had been a candidate for the Hexennacht representative.

She was here now as a U.A.H. representative.

She used spatial cutting, so teleportation spells were familiar to her. The power of 2000 Magino Frames had teleported half that number here, but...

...This was the limit when starting from Europe.

That was a practical range, but it was still less than half the circumference of the earth. However, teleporting something smaller would not extend that range. In fact, the weaker the “field” of the object, the shorter the distance it could travel.

Those had been the optimal conditions.

And once she had arrived, it had looked like Horinouchi’s daughter had brought the other Rankers to see her, but...

“The Rank 1 is here to greet me!?”

“No.”

Straight ahead, the gas mask girl took a step back in her pink Normal Form and swung both arms toward Lisbeth.

“I’m not greeting you. I’m eliminating you.”

It was ash.

She threw blossoms full of ether.

The explosion spells could not actually hit Lisbeth. She used her Device’s spatial cutting to slice through the ashy smoke and push it to the left and right. But...

...It’s spending more time in the air?

Before, it had been split and pushed away before exploding. But now, after being split to the left and right, it approached Lisbeth from behind as if the wind were carrying it.

Which meant...

“Is this ‘wind’ meant to respond to my spatial cutting!?”

“I won’t tell you.”

Fine. I can figure it out on my own. In fact, I already understand it fairly well.
And...

“———”

As soon as she stepped forward, the pink Normal Form flipped backwards.

Lisbeth swung her Device’s blade up toward her. But...

“Ohh.”

Her opponent had swung her hoe Device during her backflip.

They both swung their weapons up toward the heavens.

Blade clashed with blade tip.

Sparks and ether light flew and a portion of Lisbeth’s spatial cutting was negated.

A moment later, the flowers bloomed.

The ash that had been gently blown behind her was transformed into flowers which exploded.

Things had gotten quite troublesome behind her, but it was in front that required her attention.

...She interfered with my spatial cutting.

The next attack would be dangerous.

Her opponent had created a hole in her spatial cutting, so the girl was undoubtedly planning to shove the flowers through there.

This girl was pretty good. Lisbeth could think of a few ways to deal with this, but one was more exciting than the others.

Thus, she instructed herself to take a step forward and do this in a different way from her opponent.

“Fire.”

Instantly, eight pillars of light dropped from the sky toward the pink Normal Form.

Eight Magino Devices waiting in the heavens had fired their main cannons.

Hunter saw European U.A.H.'s decision.

...They're eliminating the Rank 1 here!?

She had noticed the eight Magino Devices instantly turning in the air. The Rank 1 also would have noticed those giant forms directly above her.

But Lisbeth had moved in close to keep the girl from escaping.

Then the Magino Devices fired.

A hit would be devastating.

That meant two things.

One, the European U.A.H. Representative named Lisbeth was taking a hostile stance against the headmaster.

Two, she did not want the Rank 1.

This would show that she saw the headmaster's protégé as unneeded.

...Is she prioritizing control of this place over victory on Hexennacht!?

The Rank 1 was higher in the ranks than Hunter and the others. That meant she had higher odds of victory if she fought at Hexennacht. But...

"If you don't do what European U.A.H. wants, you'll be eliminated!?"

Had there even been a chance to talk this out?

No. The headmaster had been the one to pick this fight. That made Hunter think that European U.A.H. had not been given a choice in the matter, but that may have been due to her familiarity with the methods of a powerful nation like America.

If someone sought to shake your hand, you were friends. But if they made themselves an enemy, you would crush them with all your might. That was how a powerful nation did things.

What would American U.A.H. think of this when they heard of it? And...

"I doubt this is the end of the Rank 1."

As if to agree, Horinouchi remained motionless a step ahead.

Even after those eight blasts...

“Even we could endure that much,” said the Rank 3 standing to Hunter’s side.

And that was when it happened.

The eight descending blasts were deflected by something rising from the ground. They were transformed into explosive light and knocked back up into the air. The eight strikes had been deflected by something growing up from the ground:

“An ether forest...!?”

Lisbeth saw a forest appear.

But this was not like the Black Forest of her homeland. Instead of a forest so thick it was hard to even walk through, this was an artificial forest with plenty of walking space. And...

...A cherry tree forest...!

It covered a square of about 30 meters.

The forest let cherry blossoms scatter into the wind as it forcefully grew up toward the sky.

The eight blasts of power collided with the flowering branches that had pale enough colors to look like clouds.

A moment later, the upper layer of cherry blossoms exploded. An explosion spell blossomed across them like a burning fuse had reached the flowers and the light and sound spread faster than anyone could respond.

A great tremor reached the air and earth, and the cherry tree forest shook.

And that caused the cherry blossoms to scatter.

But they did more than just scatter as before. After being hit by that great force, the forest spread as if in resistance. The entire forest swung up toward the sky with an even greater motion.

The eight cannon blasts were hit by a fierce counterattack from the flowers.

“...”

And a chain-reaction of explosions roared through the air after the initial one.

The sky split apart.

Or it seemed to as Koutarou watched the wind whipping up and colliding with the school buildings and dorm buildings.

The immediate shockwave crashed into the buildings which had seemed so solid. The walls were scraped as if by claws and they shook from the loud noise of the explosion-resistant shutters lowering. That power also reached Koutarou where he lay on the ground.

“...Kh!”

Ah, I feel like a hero forced onto the defensive, he thought just before a stone was peeled up from the stone paving and struck him on the side of the head.

“Raise your head and you’ll get hit, Head Butler! Oh, you did get hit! Ah ha ha!”

Why do Latinos always have to be like this!? he thought as the peak of the blast passed by over their heads. It was a lot like having a steamroller of power sweeping across the stone paving.

“———”

In exchange for a moment of silence, great brightness filled their vision.

Then the blast passed them by. And...

“Head Butler!”

Hearing that, he realized a forest had appeared.

The cherry tree forest was made of ether, it covered the area from the main gate to the General Division building, and it continued to grow.

He gulped when he saw the ether rapidly fill the school building and pathway like a jungle.

There was only one thing he could say about this.

...Is the Rank 1's cherry tree forest an absolute defense against Magino Devices!?

After all, she was still using her Normal Frame.

A forest constructed in that form had surpassed eight Magino Device main cannons.

And yet European U.A.H.'s Magino Devices had combined the power for attack and movement, so if they focused on attacking, they should have been able to attack with twice the power of a normal Device.

She had endured *that*.

But the situation was still underway. The eight Magino Devices in the sky moved down, and...

"Something else is coming! 16 shots from the side!"

Just as a maid shouted that and held his head down, he saw it.

It was a blizzard of cherry blossoms.

Along the hundreds of meters from Shihouin Academy's main gate to Tokyo Bay, pink ether light blew through the sky.

When did she do that? wondered Lisbeth.

The girl had not had an opening to make a firing command. After all, Lisbeth had been viewing her every movement with her one eye.

She could see every single action the girl took using a speed, strength, or movement spell.

She knew all of the movement techniques the girl used.

So as long as she saw the initial movement, she had thought she could tell what the girl was doing.

But she had been wrong.

"Was it the cherry tree forest!?"

The forest had moved, not the girl.

No, it was more than that.

The branches and petals were all moving autonomously. They would protect the girl even without a direct command from her. And...

“They use wind spells, don’t they!?”

There was no wind, but the branches were creaking and the leaves rustling.

The clouds of petals covered everything. They pushed endlessly toward Lisbeth and the girl and they all scattered at once.

“Interesting...!”

Lisbeth drew a sword.

Instead of just the one in her right hand, she raised her left hand to her eyepatch and pulled a second sword from there.

“I will be using this!”

The sky was split.

A diagonal cross stabbed through it from south to north.

The cherry blossom blizzard was growing to a kilometer in length, but an X-shape pierced it. The two intersecting strikes easily split through it all while expanding to a length of several hundred meters. The bottom edge severed the roof of Shihouin Academy’s General Division west building.

A moment after being quartered by the spatial cutting, the cherry blossom blizzard burst into light.

A largescale ether explosion began beyond Shihouin Academy’s main gate and spread toward Tokyo Bay.

Shihouin Academy’s defense barrier used its full power to stop the blast. Instead of just enduring it, reactive spells activated for an offensive defense. The impact resistant structures just below the surface and inside the building walls were purged by the reactive force. The explosive blast collided with the building materials that shot up toward it.

By counteracting the force of the explosive wave, the initial impact was weakened enough for the proper defense spells to function.

The blast hit.

With the outer walls and surface gone, the pulsating divine protection conduits and the armor were exposed on Shihouin Academy's southern side. The blast hit there, but then the defense divine protections kicked in. The impact was distributed out to the edges of the buildings and then erased.

But the part of the blast that escaped outside the academy was a problem.

The shockwave hit the waves of Tokyo Bay and gave the water enough force to expose the shallow ocean bottom. That pressure bent the earth's crust, and Shihouin Academy's southern side supports, which were driven deep underground, sank by about a meter and a half.

A moment later, the reactive force sent everything hopping back up.

And this happened while the academy's defense system was responding to the blow on the upper surface.

A few of the south side supports broke and the structure ruptured. Starting from the area cut during the former Rank 2 and the Rank 4's battle, the academy's foundational structure really did split from the main gate to the center.

Warning spell circles appeared here and there to warn of the danger and the thousand blades arranged in an arc in the sky were thrown out of position along the south edge.

The seawater had been launched skyward when the bottom of Tokyo Bay sprang back up, so it fell back down as rain.

But a woman sliced apart that dark, muddy rain.

It was U.A.H. Representative Lisbeth. She split the pouring rain with a cross shape and let the blue sky wash over her.

"Ha ha ha...! Yes, I thought so!"

Her enemy was right in front of her.

“That spell is Cerisier’s, isn’t it!”

Her enemy did not respond. Her small, slender form simply reached behind her as the cherry tree forest continued to grow.

Flowers bloomed, but they were not meant to explode. They decorated her neck, wrists, and head.

“Magino Frame.”

With those words, something manifested above her.

It was a great wand more than 500 meters long, but it looked something like a hoe and something like a small plant with a single leaf and a single stalk.

Horinouchi used a Shinto barrier spell for defense.

Shinto barriers “separated” the space inside and outside. Rather than defending, they shifted the internal space out of phase, so they were generally safe even if an ether explosion hit.

Or they should have been.

“Horinouchi! Is it just me or is this barrier creaking?”

“The pressure outside is too powerful, so the ground forming the foundation of this space is in a bit of trouble!”

The pouring rain was also a problem. The sand from the ocean bottom naturally had the “phase” of sea, so it was interfering with the “phase” of their temporary earth.

A barrier defense was based on the definition of its “space”, so this was a difficult situation for it. Hunter must have realized that because she summoned her servant and sighed.

“Ohh, I thought your three arrow defense was way too convenient, but I guess it has this flaw.”

“It is not a flaw! This is simply an exceptional situation!”

At any rate, something had caught Horinouchi’s attention. Mary had not taken her eyes off of the Rank 1 and she seemed to have noticed as well.

“Where is her servant!?”

The Suzaku stepped out of its spell circle and onto Horinouchi’s shoulder in a highly exasperated way, but...

...She wasn’t talking about you.

Mary meant the Rank 1 who stood below her summoned Magino Device.

She had a pink Magino Form and the clothing likely had a flower petal motif. But...

“I didn’t see a servant even when she summoned her Magino Frame!”

A voice answered Mary’s question.

It came from overhead and from the school building behind them. They looked back and saw a spell circle in sky full of wind from the explosions.

It displayed the headmaster. She must have come outside because she stood in the center of the flower garden on the north end of the courtyard. Her flat gaze was directed at her old friend.

“Fall back, Lisbeth. You will get hurt.”

The Magino Device immediately started moving.

The wand-shaped Device looked like a hoe or like a clover with a single leaf. It should have been designed longer horizontally to help it fly, but...

...It’s longer vertically?

That may have been to help the flower and plant motif.

But then the hoe blade of the single-leaf design split apart.

The leaf separated to the left and right. The three leaves that looked like a triple hoe had several turretless cannons on their surface.

“Is that...?”

Something arrived while Horinouchi spoke.

They were flowers. The many turretless cannons produced a great cluster of flowers as if spreading a cloud of pollen.

The pink cloud was even larger than before and it became smoke or balls as it

tumbled down through the sky, but those scattered before they actually reaching the ground.

“...!”

Lisbeth responded by stepping forward to protect the witches behind her.

A moment later, everything exploded.

The explosion in the center of Tokyo Bay swept light to the southeast and triggered a chain reaction.

Each individual explosion differed in size. Some turned into shockwaves at a diameter of about a meter and others devoured the surrounding explosive light to reach several dozen meters.

The water of Tokyo Bay was consumed.

The spreading explosive blizzard detonated the water once it reached the surface.

Holes formed in the water, but the water caused the explosive cacophony to reverberate high into the sky and vibrate deep into the ocean.

A low sound much like rock being struck scattered along many levels from the bottom of the ocean. And as the many roars of noise joined together, something happened.

The ocean bottom was exposed.

By that time, the explosive blizzard in the sky was about to reach the opposite bank of Tokyo Bay.

That meant the blizzard was about 10 kilometers long and it was also about 3 kilometers wide. The flowers danced through that vast space and the explosions swept through after them.

Wind, sea, sky, water, and air were all split and detonated as long as the flowers reached them.

As a result, the sky and sea of Tokyo Bay were split from south to north.

The water was ruptured, the sea bottom was dug up, and it was all blasted into

the sky in a V-shape.

And light scattered through it all. The flowers' lifespans were only momentary. They all returned to ether light and dissolved back into the air.

All that remained were the roiling sea returning to its original form and the wind that could not blow the flowers away.

As the light decorated the vast space like mist, the girl spun her hoe Device in her hand and passed it over her hips and to her other hand.

After two rotations, she spun it with her twisted fingertips and took a breath.

She looked to where her enemy had been beyond the ether light remaining from the explosions.

“— — — —”

The lenses of her gas mask pointed in that direction and she re-summoned the ether cherry trees behind her.

And when she faced forward, she spoke with a voice that echoed inside her mask and sounded like it had passed through a cave.

“I did it, mama...”

There was nothing in the direction she looked.

Nothing but the main gate lit by the setting sun.

The artificial crust had split apart and the spray from the waves reached as far as the main gate.

...So this is the Rank 1's strategy!

Koutarou watched as he moved toward the school buildings on the maid's instructions.

The power that had split Tokyo Bay had launched the water up from the valley and changed the color of the sky.

The moisture in the air was likely being compressed and falling as rain on the

shore of Chiba to the east of the academy. The somewhat darkened sky was only dark where it was raining, so it looked like a 300 meter wall rising from the ocean.

“Head Butler, is this what they call a cataclysm? Splitting the ocean and making it rain?”

Of course, Horinouchi, Kagami, Hunter, and Mary could likely do the same thing. Firing their powerful main cannon into the ocean would easily split it.

But that was simply tearing apart the ocean with their power.

Simultaneously splitting it across such a wide area was something else entirely.

The flower blizzard could hover in the air and it could produce great destructive power by detonating.

In just a short time, that girl had split about half of Tokyo Bay. Based on that speed...

“If you tried to move into a firing position, she could cover all of Tokyo Bay with that flower blizzard.”

What did that mean? The maid clicked her tongue and communicated with the other maids as she spoke.

“She uses massive simultaneous explosions over a wide area. And you can’t just defend against these bombs for an instant. They blow down on you in stages, so they keep coming even if you defend against them. And that wave-like structure is the default.”

“Do you think there is a way to avoid it?”

“A barrier that defensively solidifies the surrounding space. Although then you wouldn’t be able to attack either. Just think about it. You can’t defend against water while soaking in the pool and this is instantly spreading that pool so far you can’t escape it. Her previous opponents must have realized that and solidified their defenses, but then they couldn’t do anything themselves and their defenses were eventually worn down.”

Meaning...

“This isn’t about being shot, cut, or erased. Each individual blast might be

weak, but the explosions fill the entire battlefield and place it under her control. That is the #1's strategy."

The girl thought to herself.

She had driven the enemy off. She had defeated the leader who was the central figure of her opponents.

She had done a good job. She wanted to be praised for that.

After all, there was no one at the split in the artificial island beyond the scattering fragments of ether light.

Now she only had to do something about the 1000 Magino Devices around the island.

But she looked forward.

The main gate was about 10 meters away. The gate itself remained, but the artificial crust had split all the way up to that entrance and the ocean waves were crashing there. There was nothing else.

But she noticed something odd.

"...It's too close?"

The scenery was strange.

The scenery through the gate was slightly shifted from everywhere else.

The shifted area was exactly as wide as the gate and about 15 meters tall. The sky and waves of Tokyo Bay were different there. It was almost like she was looking at a screen displaying footage taken from beyond the shifted area.

A flower petal flew out.

The pink petal reached the space where the scenery was shifted one step forward.

"Show me."

Her request was answered by an explosion.

Destruction ran through the sky. The single explosion of light destroyed the

shifted scenery and the scenery split and fell away, showing what was really there.

The scenery of Tokyo Bay reverted to its non-shifted distance and the enemy stood there: the woman named Lisbeth, the witches working for her, and...

“Who!?”

Two unfamiliar witches were with them: a black executioner and a white and green karate fighter.

Hunter was sweating in her heart.

...Thank goodness my Magino Form summoned in time...

Horinouchi had instructed them to defend European U.A.H, so Hunter and the Rank 3 had moved between the two combatants.

Hunter tended to operate the Hedgehog primarily with her left hand, so she had approached the Rank 1 from the left while the Rank 3 did so from the right.

They had approached by stepping backwards with their backs turned toward European U.A.H. to make it clear they were here to support them. Just in case, Hunter had also held her right hand behind her back and made American military hand signs.

Then they had summoned their Magino Forms.

They had needed to endure the Rank 1's attack, but that flower blizzard had been a pain.

Even if they had summoned their Magino Devices, they would still have been contained in the space covered by the flowers. They had settled on the following plan:

“I'll summon just the armor of my Device to defend. Rank 3, you use your annihilation spell to create a barrier cutting off the surrounding space.”

The #3 created her barrier in the same way as she had at the North Pole during the previous Ranker Battle. By annihilating the space around them, she created gaps that isolated them from the space outside that.

She had not used as complex a shape as during the North Pole battle, so from the outside, it would have looked like the isolated space was missing and the surrounding scenery was shifted.

It had been Hunter's job to defend against the flowers already inside the barrier and that entered through gaps in the barrier. She used a simple method.

"Intentionally taking hits when you summoned the armor panels and then slamming them against my annihilation spell? That was a very violent method, Rank 4."

"Immediately using everything available to you is the trick to survival, Rank 3."

"You two..."

The European U.A.H. Representative turned toward them.

But Hunter did not have time to return the look. She had no Magino Device and their opponent did. The Rank 1 had also started by summoning her cherry tree forest.

Not only had the enemy taken the initiative, but they had been hit by a surprise attack.

But as the witches behind her fell back, the European U.A.H. Representative opened her mouth.

"Do you know each other?"

She did not mean Hunter and the Rank 3. She was talking about what the Rank 1 had said earlier.

"She asked 'who' when she saw you..."

"Oh, dear." Mary spoke to the Rank 4 without turning around. "Miss Hunter, you are the Rank 4 and you support America, but she's treating you like a nobody."

"Yeah, it's pretty amazing that a shut-in from another world is being treated like a nobody."

After provoking each other, they named themselves.

They spoke directly to the Rank 1.

“Nice to meet you. I am a jobber.”

“I’m a stalking horse.”

Then they moved forward. Mary used her long stride and Hunter used quick steps to accelerate.

Chapter 7: Rejection Should be Impartial

Chapter 7

“Rejection Should be Impartial”



A blooming flower has extraterritoriality



A blooming flower has extraterritoriality

From almost directly to the side, Horinouchi saw the two of them charge forward.

But she was not worried about them.

...Where was her servant!?

Where had it been when the Rank 1 had summoned her Magino Frame?

It was the same with the Normal Frame and with this attack.

“I can’t see her servant!”

“And it would seem this is not the same as with me,” noted Kagami.

“Yes, even you would have difficulty summoning a Magino Frame without a servant, wouldn’t you?”

Horinouchi doubted it would be impossible for Kagami. She trusted her that much. So she worked backwards from that assumption.

“Is her servant hiding?”

“But why?”

“Lady Kagami, I apologize for cutting in, but sniping a servant – while rare – is still an existing strategy. If the servant is injured, it can negatively affect the summoning and preservation of the Frame. ...But when summoning the Normal Frame or higher, the servant must link with the Frame’s ether, so the damage is transferred to the Frame when necessary, and...”

“Could you sum that up in three words?”

“Hiding isn’t necessary,” offered Horinouchi.

“Well done, milady!”

Of course, that was common knowledge for any witch with any combat experience.

“Seeing the servant can help judge your opponent’s strategy and strength. Over the long history of witches, almost every servant design has been used, so

just one glance can tell you quite a lot. However, we can't see that with her."

"I see," said Kagami while crossing her arms. "Understood. Not to worry. You need not hide it, Horinouchi."

"Hide what?"

Kagami placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Koutarou mentioned sniping the servant. I am sure you wanted to end this all at once by blasting her servant, but she saw it coming. Yes, that is most unfortunate, Horinouchi. But you must not take the easy way out. Even if shooting things does feel good to you."

"Were you even listening to me!? And focus on those two!"

Actually, I should be doing that too, she thought while the other two approached the enemy.

They had moved right up to her.

Hunter felt belatedly glad she had positioned herself on the right.

She had intended that as a way to prevent her attack from getting in the Rank 3's way and vice-versa, but attacking in the same place was best when attacking in waves.

There was no preventing her from determining where that was as she moved the Hedgehog's Device in with her left arm, but...

...That means it comes down to mobility!

Mary spoke while moving alongside her.

"When my annihilation spell consumed the armor panels before, I saw something interesting: The armor was destroyed by the explosion, but it was not annihilated. It did not even turn to dust."

Hunter had noticed that as well. That had only been the partially-summoned materials not being strong enough. And since the Device on Hunter's left arm had the same traits as the Magino version even if it was smaller...

"Your spike should be able to pierce the explosion!"

Hunter would attack while Mary defended. *So it got through to her after all. In that case...*

“Let’s go!”

With that shout, Hunter created a midair foothold and kicked off of it to accelerate.

Mary decided to make this an extremely short range battle.

Their opponent used explosions, flashes of light, and the extreme quantity thereof, so the greater the distance between them, the greater the risk. And since the U.A.H. Representative and the others were behind Mary, the Rank 1 would automatically be able to attack them from a distance.

So Mary moved in close to prevent the Rank 1 from doing that.

And directly in front of her, the Rank 1 finally moved when the distance dropped below 5 meters.

Or so it seemed.

...Huh?

The Rank 1 had only moved her eyes to face her. The girl had not actually made any kind of counterattack. But...

“Mary!”

Mary realized the truth when she heard Hunter’s voice.

Without her even noticing, a glowing blizzard of flowers had filled the space between her and her opponent.

...When did that happen!?

Even as she thought that, she understood. It was same with actual cherry blossoms and the fallen leaves of autumn: they surrounded you before you knew it.

This was the flow of nature. It was the ever-changing nature of all things. Simply noticing it was not enough to stop it. But...

“If I’ve noticed it, there is something I can do!”

Her Device fired its annihilation spell.

Mary erased.

Instead of making a cut, she released a trailing band of annihilation that rid that space of the flowers there.

The scythe’s movement was a lot like a broom sweeping up fallen leaves.

...I can consume them!

If they had yet to explode, they were no more than fragments of ether. She had feared they would react to the annihilation spell by detonating, but that did not seem to be the case. So...

“I will clear a path, Elsie Hunter!”

She used three annihilation scythes as a counterattack against their enemy’s first attack.

She swung them wide, but that was still not enough to fully cover for Hunter.

However, that girl would be able to weave through the gap and continue forward. In her fight against Mary, she had slipped past the annihilation spell plenty of times.

Had the Rank 1 ever endured that kind of technique?

Mary did not know, but a second blizzard followed the initial exchange.

When Mary intercepted this, she knew the flowers of the first attack that had arrived behind her would detonate. Basing this on the previous timing, that was when the detonation would occur.

So she focused on reading the smoke-like paths of the countless flowers arriving from ahead.

“Here they come!”

There were a lot of them. It really was like a blizzard of flowers.

“Just clear the important points!” said Hunter. “I have armor to handle the

rest!”

So if you have to use your armor, I have failed. Understood. Then I will erase them all. But...

...Here it is!

She had not seen *it*, but she could tell from the timing.

She sensed something using what could be called her intuition.

“She is making a counterattack!”

As the ether smoke fluttered like ashes, it focused in on Hunter.

A moment later, the detonation time arrived.

Mary sensed danger and reacted just as everything around her exploded at once.

The girl laughed quietly.

It was not a mocking or scornful laugh. She was merely reacting to the result she had accomplished.

So she laughed quietly with joy in her voice.

Her opponents had vanished, but the ether blizzard did not stop. She had more enemies further away. And...

“Over there.”

The tall figure in black who had been running toward her before had escaped to the left.

...That was a weird movement.

It had looked like teleportation, but was it really? It did not matter. The flowers would bloom no matter where she fled. The flowers would bloom, blow in the wind, and fill everything and everywhere. So...

“Begone.”

As soon as she said that, someone suddenly arrived from the right.

...Eh?

When she looked over, she saw the small enemy she had supposedly gotten rid of before.

Why was she there? And why was she unharmed?

And as the girl wondered that, she confirmed a certain fact.

The ground around the trees behind the small one had been torn apart.

The tall one had likely erased a single step's worth of space there. The small one must have escaped there and moved right back toward the girl before the flowers could catch up.

But the girl was more worried about something other than her opponent's attack.

She could see the roots of the trees in the torn apart part of the ground.

"No," she said. "Don't do that."

Hunter realized the Hedgehog's pile bunker had failed to hit.

...Seriously!?

Her opponent had moved unexpectedly.

She had grabbed a vine hanging down from a branch in the cherry tree forest behind her.

"Those weren't just for decoration!?"

The cherry trees were the source of the explosives. Assuming they were made of ether, they took the form of a forest, but they were actually a collection of explosives. Hunter had assumed this girl was scattering portions of it to produce small scale explosions.

But that was incorrect.

The cherry trees were more than just a form. Even the objects attached to them functioned naturally.

In that case, when they grew and expanded before, they were doing more than

taking form. They were growing as trees.

...Is it even possible to create an environment out of ether!?

“That’s a pretty nice show!”

Hunter used the force of the Hedgehog’s pile retracting to adjust her thoughts.

A moment later, her opponent’s smoke arrived. It was made of ether flower blossoms and they rushed in like a wave.

“Hah.”

But she laughed. She knew what to do if her attack missed. She raised the Hedgehog like a shield, and...

...I can take this!

The explosives hit her head-on. She took the hit. But in the instant of impact, she pushed the Hedgehog forward.

The wafting smoke wrapped around behind her, but she had still created an opening.

She could handle the rest herself, so she looked out from behind the shield.

...There she is!

While the Rank 1 was focused on Hunter, Mary rushed in from behind the girl.

...I lack experience!

When she shifted from defense to offense, Mary was painfully aware of her deficiency in martial arts.

She knew her height gave her an advantage and she thought she understood her faults, but things changed on a battlefield that required tight evasion and movement.

She had wanted to send an annihilation scythe toward Hunter too, but she did not have the time to spare.

She had to use two of them to secure her own safety. And...

“———!”

She sent the third scythe to attack her opponent's Device within the explosively blossoming flowers.

...I will not lose anything in this world!

She was entirely attacking from behind. It would be difficult to dodge the long scythe after noticing it at the last second.

But Mary heard a sudden voice from below the Rank 1's gas mask.

"You were the one that tore up the ground earlier."

The girl confirmed that fact without turning around.

"Unforgivable."

Mary realized there were flowers blooming below her feet as she ran forward.

They had not fallen there. They had stalks and leaves and they had grown from the "ground".

...The flowers fluttering through the air weren't the only ones!?

Just as she thought that, the horizontal swing of her annihilation spell severed the Rank 1's Device.

The hoe blade was cut diagonally off near the base.

"I did it...!"

That was when the flowers at her feet exploded.

Mary's decision made use of her previous inexperience.

She had an annihilation spell scythe positioned defensively both in front of and behind her. And she had sent the third one forward to attack.

...I can use the front defensive one for something else!!

She sent it straight up.

As soon as it tore into the air and flew 7 meters up, the surrounding flowers began to explode.

A chain reaction of explosions spread through the surrounding flowers and quickly swept across the visible scenery.

It was like a wave.

And as she watched that, Mary realized that some of the flowers did not detonate.

...They aren't all triggered at once!?

She had assumed everything would be destroyed in the chain reaction once the detonation occurred.

But she had been wrong. The explosion was arriving at Tokyo Bay with instantaneous speed, but the glowing mist and flowers did not vanish. In fact, what remained seemed to grow even thicker. Which meant...

“Once they’ve been released, the detonation space only grows denser and denser!”

It would not all be over after an explosion or two. It would only grow and grow. Also...

“What does that mean!?”

The Rank 1 was not holding her Device.

The Magino Device still existed. It rose toward the heavens and scattered flowers into the air at the center of the cherry tree forest that spread beyond even the academy.

But the Rank 1 was not holding the Device that Mary had cut.

No. It had simply fallen to her feet where it sank into the ever-growing undergrowth of flowers.

...Miss Horinouchi said she couldn't see this girl's servant, but...

She was maintaining and controlling her Magino Device without a control Device.

When Mary had fought Kagami and Horinouchi, she had temporarily withdrawn after her control Device had been destroyed, but was this opponent ignoring that necessity?

“No.”

That did not matter. Mary had once fought a “god”. Compared to that, this was only an unknown technique used by someone at her school. And since she could see the Magino Device...

“Summon Magino Device Ira!!”

The servant that appeared in the spell circle over her shoulder rapidly released her already heated Phlogiston Heart.

The black multi-scythe Magino Device immediately appeared below her feet.

Hunter fell back while watching Mary’s attack.

...She summoned it in this space!? Is she hoping for a draw at best!?

A Magino Frame was summoned into a certain space. It could be set up to “consume” whatever was already there, but it was generally made to “reject” it all by pushing it out of the way.

Mary’s Magino Device was not very durable, so it would almost certainly use the rejection method. But...

“It won’t last when the explosions hit it!”

Hunter did not need to think about hurrying. The Rank 3 was just that kind of person. So Hunter raised her voice while riding the stream of explosions away from the center.

“Fire...!”

Or would ‘annihilate’ be more accurate? she wondered as she looked to the sky.

Transparent lines ran through the crimson evening sky as fragments of light blew through it like snow.

Nine full-power annihilation spell scythes raced toward the enemy’s Magino Device while giving no consideration to defense.

“I’ll win this...!”

Mary was relieved that she got her attack in before the explosions were triggered.

...I can make it!

The annihilation spell scythes had taken flight. Even if her Magino Device was destroyed, she could still slice through her opponent.

She was relieved, but she did not let her guard down. She put Ira through as much evasive action as it could manage. Even with everything turned to explosives in this space, she would have some hope if this movement could open a small gap. So...

“Full speed in reverse...!”

She instructed the nine scythes to move back while pointing backwards, but then a spell circle appeared next to her face.

It was from Hunter. The girl was falling back while being hit by a few explosions inside the spreading cherry tree forest down below.

“They bloom on spells!”

Mary had no idea what Hunter meant until it happened.

Flowers bloomed on the communications spell circle.

...Is that what it means to create an environment!?

Hunter realized where the danger was.

“The flowers!”

The flowers were more than just bombs. After all, the ether flowers had bloomed on the spell circle she had been using to communicate with Mary. And those flowers had dug their roots into the spell circle while growing up with stalks and leaves.

...Do these flowers grow as plants!?

And then the flowers scattered. They were clearly growing much faster than

the previous ones. And Hunter had seen all too well what would happen after that.

They exploded.

“Kh...!”

The communication was cut off. The spell circle itself had been shattered. But she understood something.

...There's no escape in this environment!

The density of the flowers alone was dangerous, but...

“Flowers bloom on whatever this storm of flowers touches! So...”

What about that? she wondered. The flowers had bloomed on a spell circle just now. In that case...

“What about the annihilation spell!?”

She saw explosions draw several arcs through the sky.

It happened at the midpoint between Mary's Magino Device and their opponent's Magino Device. A chain reaction of explosions followed the path of the nine scythes.

Mary saw the nine explosive paths in the evening sky.

The nine arcs rapidly tore through the air, but it ended there.

The annihilation spells had detonated. And it had happened because...

...Flowers bloomed on them!?

She did not need to question it. Exploding ether flowers had bloomed on all nine curving lines.

Her means of attack had been blocked.

And she doubted her opponent had given any specific instructions.

The exploding cherry blossoms and flowers grew in this space of blowing flowers. Inside that environment system, their weapons, attacks, and everything else were no more than soil and seedbeds for explosives.

And she heard a voice.

The unseen Rank 1 spoke from the forest below.

“Flowers will bloom anywhere.”

Her singsong voice contained a tinge of delight.

“They belong everywhere.”

And...

“That is the world my mama wanted.”

With that, Mary finally understood. Her enemy’s attack was not an explosion spell.

It was something that environmentally produced explosion spells.

“Is the enemy’s Magino Frame spell a growth spell!?”

As soon as she shouted that, flowers bloomed on Ira. They quickly grew and blossomed from the tip and right up to Mary’s feet.

...What?

She had to evade. The black multi-scythe Magino Device was instantly covered in glowing flowers and lost its black color. And...

<Warning>

A wave of light arrived from out front.

The next chain reaction of explosions was racing toward her.

“Kh...!”

She quickly jumped away to use Ira as a shield. And the instant she threw herself into empty air, the wave of light washed over the 500 meter Magino Device and it burst.

It was destroyed as a single explosion.

“Lady Mary...!”

Koutarou saw the explosion in the sky as he pressed his back against the front

wall of the General Division building.

...What was that attack!?

It was an environment system that filled that space with explosive attacks. Constructing that was her primary means of attack.

“I see,” sighed the maid who had interfered with the General Division building’s barrier to reinforce their protection. “Head Butler, do you remember what our upperclassmen said after losing to the Rank 1 and leaving the Horinouchi family?”

It was...

“ ‘She used an absolute defense and absolute attack to become unbeatable.’ ”

That was exactly right. Everything in the environment, including the air and earth, existed to attack the Rank 1’s opponent. There was no distinction between offense and defense.

“A space where everything is ‘absolute’...”

“Head Butler, I apologize for interrupting you in your excitement, but Lady Mary...”

Oh, right, he thought as he looked to the evening sky beyond the scattering ether light.

...She lost Ira!

Is she all right? he wondered before spotting something.

Two giant objects made their presence known with the setting sun behind them and the flowers surrounding them.

“Those are...”

They were a giant blue and white sword and a giant vermilion and white bow.

They were Kagami’s Dikaiosyne and Horinouchi’s Akerindou.

The two Magino Devices were clearly positioned right where Ira had exploded. Koutarou did not really understand, but...

“Well done, milady!”

“Um, let’s save that for when we know what happened, Head Butler.”

I have reserved the right to say it, he told himself.

Horinouchi realized how dangerous the situation was.

“Horinouchi, how is Mary?”

“I collected her. She was falling, so it was a good thing Akerindou is so long vertically.”

Mary sat on her knees on the lower right main wing that passed behind the barrel on the side.

She had likely lost her tension, so it was impressive that she had maintained her Magino Form.

...She really hates to lose, doesn’t she?

If Horinouchi or Kagami egged her on, Horinouchi was pretty sure Mary would come up with another idea and fiercely attack the Rank 1.

But the situation was not looking good. After all...

...If we fight the Rank 1 while the Headmaster watches, it might count as a Ranker Battle.

They were not ready.

And the enemy had just now revealed what she could do.

Was it too much to hope for enough time to come up with a countermeasure?
But...

“Are you going to run, Horinouchi?”

“I’d like to settle for putting some distance between us.”

She had only said to protect the U.A.H. Representative.

Those two had attacked the Rank 1 afterwards because they had let her provoke them, but...

...They were trying to get her to show how she fights to help with our Ranker Battle, weren’t they?

Horinouchi should probably thank them. And then Mary looked up at her.

“What should I do? ...I can try it once more.”

“Hold on,” said Hunter. “Do you have enough ether to run back home crying afterwards? You aren’t talking about a one-way trip, are you?”

“Ho ho? And who is it that is wasting a ton of ether just to howl into the distance?”

They sure do get along, thought Horinouchi, but Hunter’s intervention had come in handy.

“Here they come.”

No, they had arrived a bit ago.

They were circling in the evening sky over Tokyo Bay.

“Those American U.A.H. reinforcements from Atsugi were a lot of help.”

“That was cloooooose.”

Hunter realized the waves of detonation had ceased even though the amount of flowers blowing through the air had not lessened.

And she heard jets tearing rapidly through the sky.

Eight F-23s had been scrambled from Atsugi and they had done a splendid job.

“The three-dimensional monitoring from the eight fighters is checking on the paths and movements of the ether flowers, calculating out the most dangerous airspace, and sending that to those two via me.”

Hunter was providing data on the situation below and from her position in front of the enemy.

There was one thing in particular she had to be careful about.

...I need to leave an impression that the US was involved.

It would be dangerous if this developed into a Ranker Battle.

She did not know how great a gap in strength there was between the Rank 1 and the duo of Kagami and Horinouchi. The Rank 1’s spell might be

overwhelmingly more useful as a countermeasure against the Black Witch, but Hunter doubted this rushed situation would allow the two of them to draw out their true strength in a Ranker Battle.

“Of course, I attacked them at just such a moment myself.”

Despite her self-deprecating comment, the F-23s focused on making their presence known as they noisily tore through the air.

If the Rank 1 took action, they might be caught in the crossfire. That prevented her from beginning a Ranker Battle or from displaying her and the Headmaster’s “justice”.

In a way, Hunter was sacrificing herself to defend and intervene.

The rest had been up to Kagami and Horinouchi, but those higher Rankers had performed flawlessly. They had set up a barrier to secure a safe zone and then summoned their Magino Devices.

Also...

“European U.A.H., huh?”

The cherry tree forest came to a sudden stop by the main gate behind her.

It was cut off in a cross shape and someone walked in through that opening.

“Lisbeth Lueger.”

She had not been injured in the slightest during all of the explosions, but was that due to her technique or her experience? The woman was full of mysteries, but there was one thing Hunter could say for sure.

“Kagami, Horinouchi. ...You’re in charge from here on.”

Chapter 8: Absolute Declaration of Intentions

Chapter 8

“Absolute Declaration of Intentions”



Do they not want to touch this?
Do they want stay away from this?
I don't know, but my opponent smiles

Do they not want to touch this?

Do they want stay away from this?

I don't know, but my opponent smiles

"Lady Headmaster!"

Horinouchi heard Kagami speak.

She also saw Kagami point dramatically forward with Dikaiosyne's control Device.

The blue and white gunblade pointed toward the tall Magino Device from which the glowing flowers spread.

Horinouchi wondered if the Rank 1 was there.

...She is.

She was on top of the Magino Device.

She stood on top of one of the three blades spread out like leaves atop the standing hoe-shaped Device.

She was hard to see from this distance, so Horinouchi used a telescope spell. The spell circle was accompanied by four American U.A.H. spell circles.

...This shows the situation from above and provides data on the density and speed of the spreading flowers, doesn't it?

It was the data taken by those circling in the sky. Some of it was quite comprehensive, so she could tell Atsugi was assisting with the data processing.

"Can you see this too?"

Just as she wondered what she was supposed to be seeing, another four spell circles appeared. They all provided close ups of her and Mary.

"H-how many planes do you have flying upside down up there!? And Hunter, this one from below is you, isn't it!?"

"I get paid for cooperating."

The girl was impressively shameless about her motivation, but if American

U.A.H. was doing all this...

...European U.A.H. must be communicating with the Headmaster.

With that thought, she nodded toward Kagami.

She thought this was a good time to end this conflict.

But when she looked over, Kagami was lying down on top of her Device and pointing a photography spell toward her.

“Hurry it up...!”

You don't have to bow down Dikaio. This is your master's responsibility.

“Now, then.” Kagami swung the control Dikaiosyne forward once more. “Lady Headmaster! I would like for the Rank 1 and European U.A.H. to end this conflict! After all,” she continued. “Her official opponent is us!”

She pointed to the girl standing on the tall Magino Device a kilometer away.

She had referred to the gas mask girl as “her” and she used the same pronoun once more.

“We do not wish for another force to intervene in our Ranker Battle with her or for the trouble that will bring! We only wish for an official battle with her!”

As soon as her raised voice traveled across the sky, her opponent took action.

While standing on the hoe Magino Frame, she opened a spell circle.

...For communication?

Was she speaking with the Headmaster? But that must have only lasted a few words because the girl suddenly raised both hands.

At the same time, everything around her turned to fragments of ether.

...Oh?

The air, the forest, the scattering flowers, and even the noise scattered as fragments of ether.

The sound of shattering glass started as a wave. By the time Kagami turned toward Horinouchi, it had grown into the great reverberation of a waterfall as it

raced through the sky.

She seemed to have rewritten the world.

The Rank 1 had canceled her spell.

Hunter saw two actions as the falling and dancing ether light fragments washed over her.

First, Dikaiosyne and Akerindou came apart and self-destructed directly overhead.

Second, the tall Magino Device to the north also shattered and self-destructed.

But the Rank 1 was still there.

She dispelled her Magino Form and stood in midair.

She was standing on the hoe Device that Mary had supposedly split before.

...Well, she is from the Honors Division.

It was less about power than about being incomprehensible.

As rumored, the Rank 1 was from the Honors Division.

The Honors Division building was probably located directly below her.

Hunter saw Kagami and Horinouchi descending within Dikaiosyne and Akerindou's falling ether light.

By the time those two could see the Rank 1 in the sky beyond the General Division building...

"This really is a blizzard of flowers."

Just how much ether was in the air?

The density had dropped, but the fragments of light never seemed to fully vanish as they continued dancing around the area.

What did it all look like to the F-23s flying overhead?

But as the sky was returned to normal, a new light appeared there.

“I see.”

It was the Headmaster’s voice.

Hunter saw and heard.

In the courtyard, on the school buildings, inside the buildings, and – most importantly for her – on the roof of the General Division building above her, spell circles appeared to display the Headmaster’s face.

She was in the sky.

...Is she next to the Rank 1?

Hunter could see two people on top of the distant hoe Device that had fallen onto its side. The Rank 1 was on the left and the Headmaster on the right.

That’s a neat trick, she thought as the Headmaster looked out at her from the footage.

“You want a Ranker Battle, don’t you? You want this external influence driven out to ensure a pure battle, don’t you?”

“Yes, that is our intention.” Horinouchi placed a hand on her chest. “After all, the Ranker Battles determine which witch is chosen for Hexennacht. That is the privilege given to Shihouin Academy, we have been presented with an opportunity to exercise that right, and we intend to do so.”

So...

“If any power would interfere with that, we must fight back.”

Horinouchi turned around to face the main gate.

She looked to Lisbeth there.

“Now, the conflict has ended for the time being.” She spoke to Lisbeth and the other European U.A.H. witches behind her. “From now on, we and the rest of the witches here will respond if you attack. Do you understand?”

Horinouchi’s words received a response.

It began as shadows and grew into countless sounds and presences.

More and more people appeared from behind the school buildings, in the windows, on the edge of the roofs, and behind or in the trees.

...Ohh.

They were witches. All of the witches of Shihouin Academy made an appearance.

Horinouchi stood in the lead, but she simply stared at the European U.A.H. Representative without turning back toward the others.

“What do you say to that, European U.A.H. Representative Lisbeth?”

The witch representative from Europe made a single movement.

“Let me ask one thing. ...To Student Representative Horinouchi Mitsuru.”

“Yes. What is it?”

...She really has guts to not be intimidated here...

As Hunter thought that, the European U.A.H. Representative asked her question.

“Do you intend to become the Rank 1?”

“Of course.”

“I see.” The European U.A.H. Representative nodded once. “In that case...we can speak again once you are the Rank 1.”

She took a breath.

“Until then, U.A.H. shall protect Shihouin Academy.”

Horinouchi heard cheers behind her.

...That puts that problem off until later.

They had not actually solved the problem.

But Lisbeth had chosen her to negotiate with at a later date. Of course, that was on the condition that she and Kagami became the Rank 1.

But the current situation was over. Hence the cheers.

...But what does this mean?

She had a question.

Why had Lisbeth chosen her and Kagami becoming the Rank 1 as her condition?

It was as if...

“She seemed to be saying she wishes for us to stop the Headmaster and that girl over there.”

Kagami sent that quiet comment and Horinouchi had to agree.

...So Kagami is curious too.

With that in mind, she wanted to ask Lisbeth why she was supporting them.

The focus of Hexennacht was achieving victory over the Black Witch, so it was best to support the more powerful witch and it made little sense to hope anyone in particular would take the #1 spot.

However, she was not given time to ask about that.

“Very well,” said the Headmaster in the spell circle in the sky. “Then let’s do that.”

She readily compromised.

...Is that really okay?

That was awfully obedient compared to the initial rejection.

Something was not right.

Combined with Lisbeth’s previous condition, it felt like those two had some kind of hidden understanding.

But the Headmaster continued as if to ignore Horinouchi’s doubts.

“First, please fall back, Lisbeth. At the very least, I do not intend to welcome you as a guest or as an academy official as long as I hold the position of Headmaster.”

That comment turned several gazes toward Lisbeth.

What would the European U.A.H. Representative do now that she had been

told to fall back? The other U.A.H. witches and the Shihouin witches gave her looks of doubt and curiosity.

Lisbeth sighed in front of them all.

“So you are prepared to go that far.”

“As I am now, I must be prepared for anything I might do.”

“But.” Lisbeth looked around. “Are you okay with the way things are now!?”

“We had a promise, Lisbeth.”

...A promise?

Horinouchi did not know what “the way things are now” meant.

But she heard a quiet bitter laughter. It came from the Headmaster in the spell circle. Her shoulders shook and she pulled the Rank 1 toward herself atop the Device.

It was not quite a hug, but she did pull the girl right alongside her.

“Listen. The Rank 1 and 2 will have their showdown early tomorrow morning.”

That was half a day away.

...That doesn't give us much time.

Did the Headmaster not want them to have time to prepare?

But Kagami suddenly tilted her head. She pointed her right index finger toward the Headmaster and Rank 1 in the distance instead of at the spell circle.

“Lady Headmaster.” She asked a question. “Is she who I think she is?”

“Yes.”

The Headmaster nodded with a smile while the Rank 1 removed her gas mask and hid behind the woman.

Her face was revealed.

...Ah.

It was the girl who had passed by them when they were throwing out the trash earlier.

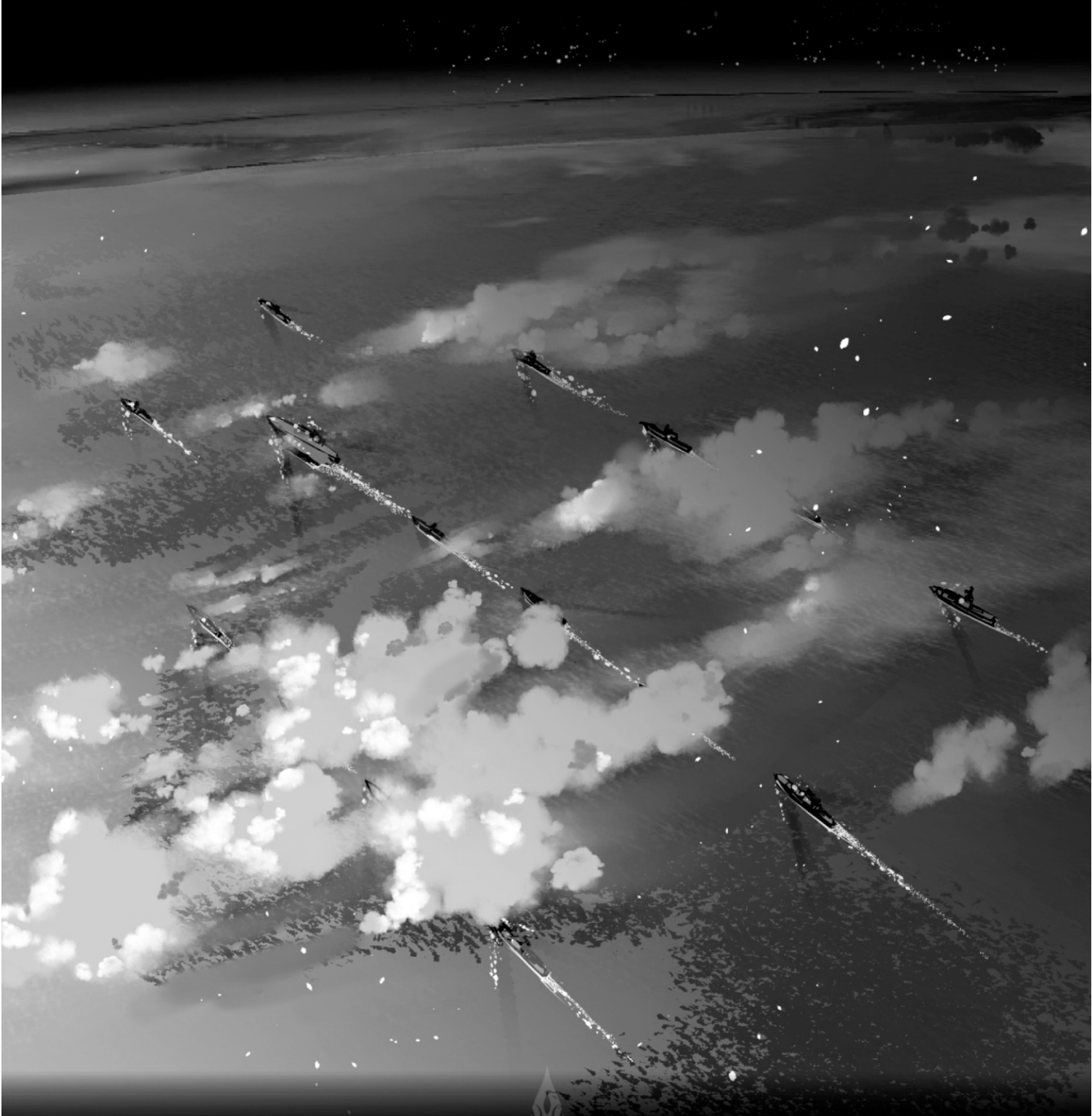
But the Headmaster placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled.

“This is Shihouin Fleur, my daughter.”

Chapter 9: Now, What to Do?

Chapter 9

“Now, What to Do?”



An aerial, black-and-white photograph of a naval battle. Several warships are visible on the water, moving in various directions. Large plumes of white smoke or steam are rising from the water around the ships, indicating intense action or damage. The ships are leaving dark wakes behind them. The overall scene is chaotic and dramatic.

**If we leave it be
The world will ring the bell
Because we left you be
World, ring the bell**

If we leave it be

The world will ring the bell

Because we left you be

World, ring the bell

Without waiting for the sun to set, America's 7th Fleet left Hawaii and set out for Japan with an accompanying fleet.

The primary aircraft carriers joined the ships sent as reinforcements from the 3rd Fleet back at the American mainland. Altogether, they formed a fleet of 65 ships which accelerated toward Japan while prepared for combat.

The onboard aircraft had already been fixed in place. Thanks to the ships' spell thrusters and the friction-reduced cruising provided by the emblems on the armor, they exceeded a speed of 170 kph.

The interior of the ships were bustling with energy during the friction-reduced cruising.

The friction-reduced cruising was managed by the men who specialized in that sort of spell, and the acceleration system was managed by the women.

They were usually divided between their division and specialty, but the magicians and witches were currently working together while sharing the roles.

The structure was quite simple with everyone split into just two groups and both reports and strategy meetings were being made or held throughout the ship.

"Listen, everyone."

The ships rang with the low voice of the second-in-command witch, Song Café. Her voice caused the witches to stiffen and bow while the magicians tensed their shoulders.

She spoke calmly.

"I'm done looking pathetic. ...Make sure we arrive in Japan on time. We have 8 hours."

“Aye, sir!”

They all raised their voices and the ships began to change form.

They were transforming into their higher acceleration form.

Large ships were affected by water resistance and – to a certain extent – the curvature of the earth. The center of the bottom was easily pushed up by waves and those impacts could damage the ship, so...

“Transform from acceleration cruising form to higher acceleration cruising form!”

The smaller ships moved to the left and right while the aircraft carriers and battleships rearranged the bottom of their hulls. The joints of the armor panels were released and the center to the back was curved upwards. This slightly shifted the weight to the front, so the entire ship would essentially be continuing down a never-ending slope when the curvature of the earth was taken into account.

And to factor in the earth’s rotation, the entire ship was curved somewhat to the left.

“Higher acceleration preparations complete! Connecting power!”

“Yes, good girl. ...Accelerate to 200 knots in 3 minutes.”

There were some surprised gasps or annoyed groans here and there, but no more than that.

“Aye, sir!”

With that identical response from every last post, the ocean was split by ether acceleration light.

The air was split and a heavy whistling sound was produced by mostly the aircraft carrier decks.

They were traveling northwest where the setting sun still shined, but the sky over Japan already looked dark to them.

Inside the primary aircraft carrier’s briefing room, a few reports and decisions were made.

“Honestly.”

A woman clicked her tongue. She had short blonde hair and she wore the insignia of a naval rear admiral and a badge containing a musical note and a shot glass. Inside the chair-less conference room, she opened a spell circle on the table that displayed a map of the ocean.

“I never thought European U.A.H. was capable of such a largescale transfer spell. Having the world’s greatest ability to transport supplies was supposed to be our selling point, but they’ve completely outdone us, A-un Silver Coin.”

She looked to a black-haired woman wearing a jacket bearing the insignia of a vice admiral who smiled bitterly.

“We learned our lesson last Hexennacht and don’t keep our command post fixed in Yokosuka, but here we are wishing it was still there. ...Right, Song Café?” She narrowed her eyes. “Now, can you win a direct confrontation with Lisbeth Lueger or Shihouin Cerisier?”

...This is bad...

As Hunter listened in with her spell circle, she realized her superiors were even more dangerous than she had thought. She had made a casual report and assumed they would leave this to her, but...

...The fleet is on the move, they’re in higher acceleration form, and the captains are saying some ominous things. What am I supposed to do?

At this rate, if anything more happened, the 3rd Fleet would show up to create a Combined Pacific HQ and the president might even show up.

...I can’t believe this.

She started sweating and feeling blue, but she was currently taking a break in Horinouchi’s room.

Things had been so peaceful not long ago, so how had this happened?

“And just when I was hoping to get some dinner and hold a strategy meeting now that the sun has set.”

“Dinner...!?”

That surprised response came from Mary who sat to her left.

The two of them were by a lounge table where Kagami and Horinouchi sat across from each other.

Those two were in chairs while Hunter and Mary were on the floor.

To Hunter’s left, Mary quickly straightened her posture.

She then bowed toward the two at the table.

“I could not possibly have you go to that sort of trouble after I could not even win that battle.”

...Here we go again.

Kagami crossed her arms and nodded in a theatrical way, but Horinouchi glared down at Mary and waved her hands to say “stop that”.

Hunter pointed to the left, pointed to her own head, and then tilted her head.

Then Mary looked over at her while still bowing.

“It would seem you haven’t learned your lesson, Rank 4.”

“Is there anything I need to learn a lesson about?”

Oh, right. The whole 7th Fleet thing.

“Yes, can’t I handle Lisbeth Lueger using a pinpoint bombardment of barrier bombs from long distance? I specialize in quantity and long distance attacks. I can hit her with a triple digit number of attacks before we’re even close enough to send out our witch unit. But then what about Shihouin, A-un Silver Coin? Isn’t she also a worthy opponent?”

“Hmm, the others wouldn’t like it if I used the same method as you, Song Café, so how about we have the Silent Service deployed near Japan fire strategic barriers and see what happens?”

“Hey, don’t think you can just take the easy way out!”

“But I’m so busy managing the fleet! So very busy! It isn’t easy managing the

fleet when we have reinforcements with us like this! Do you want to try it in my place, Song Café!?”

“What!? Are you sure you want that!? Did you forget last time I took over for you when three of the battleships flipped over backwards!? Do you really want me doing that again!?”

<Request from the control spirits of the accompanying ships: “Please don’t.”> “You cowards!”

“Cowards!!”

“...Um, hi. This is Hunter.”

“Ah!? We’re getting kind of worked up right now, so keep it down!”

“That’s right, Hunter. And sorry if we end up destroying your home, okay?”

...I can’t believe this...

Hunter wanted to believe she had made an effort to fix it, but at this rate, the 7th Fleet could easily intervene in the Ranker Battle.

She had told them the Ranker Battle would be held like normal, so how had this happened? And even if Song Café was a lost cause, why was the commander known as A-un Silver Coin getting so carried away?

...She did this in the sea off of Vietnam too, didn’t she?

Her motto was “what a pain”, but the real problem was how she could also be quick to action thanks to her short temper. That was why it was generally Song Café who responded to things, but that was not the case this time.

...Well, they did have their pride wounded by European U.A.H.

They had apparently received word of European U.A.H.’s wand viewing ceremony while away from Japan to patrol the ocean and observe the moon. That alone would not have warranted a response, but word of the transfer spell had been leaked to them.

They would not have arrived in time for European U.A.H.’s arrival while out observing the moon. And even if they had, they would not have been prepared

for combat and the fleet would have been low on ships.

That was why they had fallen back to Hawaii to wait it out.

The 7th Fleet had 7000 witches during peace time and they could mobilize 24,000 during war time.

But even during war time, they would only have 2000 elites capable of aerial combat and constructing a front line.

...Of course, 2000 is still a pretty major threat.

That was why American U.A.H. could remain independent from the rest of U.A.H.

But European U.A.H. had sent in 1000 witches and Magino Devices.

The 7th Fleet would of course not be the only group responding. Atsugi and the other functioning bases would work with them.

But if it did come to a clash, American U.A.H. needed a definite victory.

That was why the supervisors of the Pacific had made the humiliating choice of waiting in Hawaii. It was only after reinforcements had arrived that they had started for Japan.

“The only other question is how much we can restrict this.”

“If possible, I want to keep it out at sea. It would be a problem if they used the academy as a hostage, but Japan’s Imperial Household Agency did give me a map of the Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples around Tokyo Bay, so we could have the SEALs set up a ley line barrier while we settle it in Tokyo Bay.”

Kagami and Horinouchi seemed to be giving it a fair amount of thought, but at the base of it all...

“...Man, do I wish we had done the previous Ranker Battles properly,” complained Hunter.

“Are all those spell circles from the US military?”

“Well, yeah, more or less.”

“Oh?” said Kagami. “What stance are they taking?”

“The same as ours.” Hunter shrugged while sitting on the floor. “If Hexennacht is happening, it’ll be in Japan. And Horinouchi is aiming for the Rank 1 spot as the representative of eastern Japan. So if you two win and do become Rank 1, then in a way, the right to Hexennacht will fall to whoever is in charge here. Plus, Japan is allied with the US, the two countries get along, and I’m also an upper Ranker, so it’s all a pretty good deal for the US.”

“A good deal?”

“After Hexennacht, the US can benefit a lot alongside Japan.”

“What happens if we lose Hexennacht?”

Horinouchi tilted her head, so Hunter answered while hitting and erasing some new spell circles full of bickering.

“After last time, America has distributed its forces across the sea and land. And most of the cities on the equator were moved north while unmanned interception systems were placed there instead. That means there will be less damage this time. And with that in mind, everyone is still prepared to fight. That’s how they convinced the other nations that we deserve more of the benefit after Hexennacht.”

But...

“European U.A.H. has a relatively safe position, but they’re trying to take that benefit for themselves, right? We’re kind of ignoring that part right now, but America will want to make their presence known to warn European U.A.H. not to try anything.”

A sign frame popped up from the 7th Fleet:

“We have but one option: Let’s kick their asses!”

“Yes, they really are asking for an ass-kicking!”

...Why are you getting ahead of yourselves!?

Well, surely they mean “if it comes to that”.

“Of course, if the US makes a show of force and ends up fighting here, it could easily cause trouble for Japan and this academy. American U.A.H. would only be taking on the minimum risk needed to protect their own, but European U.A.H.

loses their justification of defending against Hexennacht if they end up fighting American U.A.H. That's why they won't be able to do anything. And this is the will of America more than just the 7th Fleet."

"Does my presence as the Rank 3 not affect anything?"

"You don't belong to any country. And since you get along with Horinouchi and me, we can act as negotiators if someone else tries to recruit you. So in America's view, you're more of a return than a risk."

"Then what about me?" asked Kagami.

"Well." Hunter waved her hands back and forth. "You're returning to your original world after Hexennacht, right?"

...That's right.

Horinouchi felt somehow disappointed about that obvious fact.

...If we win Hexennacht...

She of course intended to win. She knew she was doing everything she could to that end.

But if they won, it meant goodbye. And...

"Who knows what happens if we lose."

"The different countries are predicting they will at least take similar levels of damage to last time, aren't they? But..."

"But what, Hunter?" asked Kagami.

"You've got a bad feeling about this, don't you? The Black Witch has noticed you're here, Kagami."

So...

"If we lose the next Hexennacht, won't the world be erased?"

"True enough," said Kagami. "The Black Witch was originally trying to destroy this world, but she was sealed inside a restricted area and her power was

suppressed.”

“But during the previous Hexennacht, her minions were sent outside the seal.”

“In that case.” Kagami crossed her arms. “You could say the seal is no guarantee against destruction. ...Shouko knows I am here. She knows I have finally caught up with her.”

She had not reached the previous world in time. Her little sister had already moved on to another world, so that creation of her sister as a “god” – a world already tending toward destruction – had been given the last push towards its doom.

That had happened many times before.

She had found what she could call her sister’s presence or retreating back, but...

“This is my first time facing her head-on. Not only is this world very similar to the world we lived in, but Shouko probably sees it as her masterpiece.”

“Can the destruction of a world really be called a masterpiece?”

“At a certain age and in a certain environment, people think it is cool to reject a happy ending.”

So...

“I should probably apologize.”

“For what?”

That was obvious.

“Kagami? You had better not be so full of yourself that you claim your presence here will destroy the world during the next Hexennacht.”

Mary heard Horinouchi speak.

“Listen,” she said. “If the Black Witch does try to destroy the world this Hexennacht, it isn’t because you’re here.”

Instead...

“It’s because my mother gave her so much trouble last Hexennacht. So when she sees we’re still defying her, she will decide she can’t hold back this time. That is how well the previous generation and we have done.”

...This girl...

With that thought, Mary nodded in her heart.

This girl had been born to a ruined world and intended to defeat the Black Witch.

Mary’s “teacher” had come from an outside world and intended to defeat the Black Witch.

Had it been the same in Mary’s world?

...No.

They had placed their hopes in Mary’s “teacher”.

They had relied on her.

But these two had defeated her and Hunter and now stood out ahead of them. They had different backgrounds, yet they were the same.

As she was now, Horinouchi would not give in to the Black Witch even without Kagami here.

And as Horinouchi stared at Kagami on the other side of the table...

“...Ah.”

She seemed to notice they were still looking each other in the eye.

She looked away and Mary’s “teacher” smiled.

“Thank you.”

“F-for what?”

Horinouchi blushed and looked to Mary in order to change the subject.

“How long are you going to stay sitting down there?”

“This is all I deserve after failing to overwhelm an enemy just because I have never seen them before...”

“Now, now,” said the Head Butler as he walked in. “Let’s try to keep a positive outlook.”

He snapped his fingers and the maids carried in a tablecloth and some plates.

It was dinner. But the Head Butler was also focused on the 1000 Magino Devices visible out the window.

“Do you think they are monitoring us out there?”

“Yes. And it isn’t just them. Everyone is focused on a number of things at the moment. Some of us have noticed gazes from the foreign embassies and institutions.”

A few maids in the back raised a hand while opening a spell circle map of Tokyo Bay and the surrounding area.

“Some people can carry just their gazes to the windows or rooftops, so it can be a real pain.”

“Good point,” said the Head Butler as he snapped his fingers to open a large spell circle outside the window.

“Is that one of those one-way transparency spell circles?” asked Kagami.

“Indeed. From outside, it shows a commercial for Horinouchi-affiliated shrines and a promotional video of Lady Mitsuru’s battles.”

“You never told me about that second one!” protested Horinouchi.

“That was my request,” explained Kagami. “It is a superb presentation that ends with me calling your name.”

That exact part could be heard outside the window:

“Mankooooo!”

“Stay tuned for more in a sky near you!”

“Wh-why does that have surround sound!? And with narration!?”

“What is wrong with that, Horinouchi? And I doubt any of the spies will be able to focus with that playing.”

An atmosphere of “anyway” hung over them, so Horinouchi clapped her

hands. It was a signal, not for a spell.

“Let’s eat. ...And come sit at the table, Hunter and Mary. We need to come up with a plan for the Rank 1.”

Chapter 10: Finishing This Comes First

Chapter 10

“Finishing This Comes First”



This simple method
Reminds me of
The word satisfaction

This simple method

Reminds me of

The word satisfaction

The meal was steak and katsudon, the perfect choice for a pre-battle jinx.

Horinouchi and Mary sat next to each other with Kagami and Hunter across from them.

After they finished a fulfilling meal, which included Hunter asking for an extra steak, Koutarou opened a spell circle in front of their table.

“This is the footage from Lady Hunter and Lady Mary’s battle this evening.”

“Oh, the one you edited with my people.”

The image played on the spell circle had no excess information and was corrected for backlight and anything other distractions.

They all looked to the Rank 1’s spell.

...The Ranker Battle is at 4 AM. Lady Mitsuru and Lady Kagami have less than 8 hours.

Hunter and Mary were here too in the hopes that they could be of some use.

That was wonderful.

As the head of the Horinouchi family, Horinouchi Mitsuru had to hone herself even further than the previous generation since her mother had been lost.

She was powerful, but she was also well aware of that and would show concern for others in an almost parental way. But that was different from making friends who would stand alongside her.

Koutarou had honestly thought she would live her life alone.

Even if the previous generation had been lost much too soon, she had had a husband and friends.

But given the 10 year span between Hexennachts, her daughter was taking on that challenge during her student years. That was unavoidable thanks to the

policy of the Shihouin Academy's headmaster and the Ranker Battle system.

...But those fears are gone now.

Horinouchi Mitsuru could enjoy her time with her friends and consult with them, but those friends would also risk their lives alongside her. It had only been recently that Koutarou had learned that their "Lady Mitsuru" could grow angry or laugh at other people's jokes or grow exasperated with someone.

And she had come to terms with the loss of her mother and she could face the Black Witch without falling into despair or belligerence.

Besides how this all played into Hexennacht and the Ranker Battles, Koutarou felt she was becoming an appropriate leader of the Horinouchi family.

Well done, milady. With those words in his heart, he began to speak.

"Now, about the enemy's...that is, Lady Shihouin Fleur's spell."

Horinouchi listened to Koutarou's explanation as she watched the video.

The screen showed cherry trees scattering lots of flowers into the air.

"Lady Shihouin uses an explosion spell specialized toward the traits of a flower. The spell itself is a simple explosion and this footage shows that both physical and spell shielding are effective against it."

"But this density is insane..."

"It's like the entire atmosphere turns into an explosive. Like with a dust explosion. Look."

Hunter indicated the footage recorded from her vision. Flowers were blooming from the cherry forest floor and those would grow larger before the flower flew into the air.

"Watch carefully."

Horinouchi did as instructed as saw the flying flower finally fall to the ground, where...

"It blooms again."

The fallen petals scattered and each one breathed life into new buds, which grew leaves, a stem, and then a full flower.

It took less than 5 seconds.

“Do you get it now? This is creating an environment.”

Which meant one thing:

“While they’re exploding, the unnecessary ones become seeds which spread the explosion spell through natural growth, right?”

“That is correct, milady.”

Koutarou opened a map showing Tokyo Bay from overhead.

...Shihouin Academy is in the center.

A blue dot appeared over the center of the academy. And it scattered smaller blue dots in every direction.

This was probably a diagram showing the spread of flowers by the Rank 1’s spell.

They floated like clouds as they gradually spread.

“...Eh?”

And they suddenly accelerated. Just when the flowers seemed to hit an indefinite boundary, that boundary burst and the flowers covered Tokyo Bay while accelerating to 2 or 3 times the speed.

“The color...”

Just as Mary pointed out, the blue grew to a red that indicated a greater top to bottom thickness.

After exceeding an altitude of 1000 meters, that acceleration linked with the acceleration of the flowers spreading out down below.

When Koutarou zoomed out the Tokyo Bay map to show the whole region of southern Kantou, the flowers quickly spread further west until they covered half of Tokyo. Their thickness surpassed 7000 meters.

“If there are no obstacles, the flowers will reach this state in about a minute

and a half.”

“Is this expansion caused by the seed-creation we just mentioned?”

“Yes. As the scope grows, fewer of the flowers need to explode, so the further it spreads, the more flowers can be used to increase their spreading power.”

“And based on the video, the flowers create their own environment and that environment grows stronger the denser the cloud of flowers is. That means the cherry trees grow and the number of flowers increase. When real plants are packed together like that, the central region weakens, but these evolve, starting from the central region and spreading in waves to the outside.”

The stages of acceleration seen on the diagram were when that evolution created a new version.

“Based on our calculations, it would only take about half an hour for the flowers to cover half the earth’s surface while reaching the troposphere at their thickest point.”

“Plus, in that environment, the flowers will bloom on any attack spell,” said Mary while lightly tapping her fingernails on the table. “Even my annihilation spell was turned into flowers and scattered en route. Even if the Black Witch uses attacks remotely and sends in her minions, they should be scattered as explosions once they enter that environment.”

Meaning...

“As a Hexennacht countermeasure, this creates a surefire and perfect defensive environment against the Black Witch. That is the Rank 1’s plan.”

“Wait just a moment.”

Kagami honestly thought this was a well-made method.

...Flowers that use ether as fertilizer, hm?

Magino Frames themselves were made of ether, as were spells.

This had been entirely designed as a witch countermeasure. And...

...It has some complex effects and combinations of effects for a spell, but it is

most impressive that she allows it to grow on its own as a plant and even evolve.

That would be the result of building the spell like a program and doing some selective breeding.

But Kagami did have a question.

“Where is she getting all that ether from?”

“After the spell begins, we believe the flowers absorb ether from the ley lines to grow on their own. During this battle, the coastal shrines and temples detected a change in the ley line levels they were measuring.”

“But there would have to be an initialization phase and a way to control it after it’s begun,” pointed out Horinouchi.

“No, we think the control is mostly left to the flowers and trees. The detonations use a chain reaction, so she shouldn’t need to manage the entire region.”

“No, that isn’t true.”

Mary cut in while stopping the footage of the chain reaction explosion. She zoomed in on a region of overlapping explosions.

Several bright explosions filled the evening sky, but there were also flowers scattered between them.

“Do you see this? Some of the flowers were not detonated.”

“And what do you think of that, Mary?”

“Most likely, the flowers within a certain range are labeled based on their grade and the situation. The Rank 1 can choose to detonate or not detonate them based on those labels.”

“Can you do that?”

Mary spread her hands and bent her right pinky down.

“With 9 lines, I can manage them all the way to the other side of the planet.”

Hunter whistled, but Mary only glared at her.

“My annihilation spell is a line. At best, I can create a barrier wall with it. But the Rank 1’s technique goes beyond a 1D line or a 2D surface to create a 3D mass. What do you think, teacher? As a brigadier general, what do you think of this level of ether extraction?”

“The pure amount being extracted is probably greater than I can pull off.”

When Kagami admitted that as an obvious fact, Hunter threw both hands into the air.

“Then how are we supposed to defeat her?”

That’s a good question, thought Horinouchi.

No, she could generally see what they had to do.

And Kagami must have picked up on that because she looked her way.

“Yes, how can we beat her? What would you do?”

All three of them answered at the exact same time.

“Get close and shoot her.”

“Get close and shoot.”

“Get close and shoot at her.”

“Well done, milady! Such a simple plan!”

“They get along so well.”

“That’s right. My fortunetelling also said it’s important to get close to someone before making your move.”

“Of course, the real question is how to get close to her.”

Hunter had a strategy in mind.

“We settle it before it reaches pandemic levels.”

“Agreed. Before her created environment can reach the next level, we must

approach her and destroy her Magino Device. If necessary, we can attack the spell user herself to prevent her from attacking and to knock her out.”

That was probably what it would take. And they already had a method of doing that.

“Will that mean immediately shooting after a rapid Magino Frame summoning?”

“We already know how to do the rapid summoning and shooting things is your specialty, Horinouchi, so there will be no problem there,” said Kagami. “But this will not be that simple. ...At the start of a Ranker Battle, especially one directed by the Lady Headmaster, both sides will already have their Frame at least partially ready.”

That was the problem. If the Rank 1 had her Magino Frame and environment established from the very beginning, the battle would immediately become much more difficult.

...Because her Magino Device is an environmental accelerator...

They would win if they could destroy that, but its very existence was dangerous. If she summoned it in advance and put some distance between them, things would end up the same as that evening.

“Could you keep your distance and wait until time runs to win by default or something?”

“There is no time limit rule. The battle continues until one side has won,” explained Horinouchi. “And in an endurance battle, I think the Rank 1 would have an advantage since her created environment can absorb ether and return to ether.”

“Then what do you plan to do, Horinouchi?”

“Well,” said Horinouchi as she opened a spell circle. “I will use multi-stage armored shells.”

“Multi-stage armored shells...” repeated Hunter under her breath. “Huh? Aren’t you always using those?”

“You know what those are, Rank 4?”

“Well, yeah. I was hit by a lot of them in my Normal Form before.”

Why did that lead the Rank 3 to glare at her? But back to Horinouchi’s shells...

“It’s those ones where the tip increases their penetrative power and the inside provides an impact.”

“They aren’t all like that. Different effects can be added in as stages.”

Horinouchi opened a simple diagram showing a shell inside another shell. “These have two armored layers specialized for penetrative power and the core shell within has a focus on the purification effect. The armor layers will be purged when a certain amount of flowers have bloomed on them. If I have an acceleration spell automatically kick in at that time, I think they can avoid our opponent’s lock to a certain extent.”

“Couldn’t that knock them off target?”

“Given the size of a Magino Device, I want to fire from within 3 kilometers.”

For 500-meter Devices that was more or less close range.

But they would have to do that. And...

“We need to think up a countermeasure in case she manages to start her flowers growing on their own, but I think approaching her Magino Device will work well there too. She can’t blow herself up with her own bombs, right?”

Horinouchi looked to Kagami. “So we approach while firing. Once we’re at close range, she won’t be able to attack lest she destroy herself.”

“I would assume she has a defense system for just such a scenario,” said Kagami. “But it is true it all comes down to getting close. ...And luck would have it that I can repair my armor mid-battle using my ether extraction. At least to a certain extent. And if it comes down to it, we could board her Magino Device for a direct battle.”

“So you’re saying we actually have a fair number of options?”

“But she would not be the Rank 1 if she did not have a way of crushing those options.” Kagami placed her elbows on the table. “Now, we know we can at least picture a scenario where we have the upper hand. We can wait until we have

calmed down more to picture a scenario where she has the upper hand. And we have enough time to picture ourselves overcoming that scenario. ...But I have one question.”

“What is it?”

“Koutarou? The Rank 1’s name is Fleur, correct? How much of her spell is inherited from her mother, the Lady Headmaster, just like Horinouchi’s spells were inherited from her mother? Also...”

Kagami asked one more thing.

“Since Horinouchi’s mother fought in the previous Hexennacht, that means she defeated the Lady Headmaster. Are there any records of that?”

“Well done, Lady Kagami.”

Koutarou praised Horinouchi’s partner’s question.

But he was not the one to answer it. Instead...

“Milady, please answer her.”

“Yes. Kagami. ...Look this way. We can eat dessert after we’re done talking.”

Should we serve it first? It is already lined up on the counter.

Hunter was staring in the same direction, so they ended up serving it first.

“Now, then. ...Even if it is that time of year, shiratama anmitsu with cream is a nice jinx dessert since it looks like the moon.”

“Do you care more about the state of the world or dessert?”

“I simply enjoy eating with everyone.”

“Yes, yes.”

Horinouchi spread her mouth horizontally but then glanced toward Koutarou.

She was about to discuss the past, so he nodded back at her, as did the maids waiting behind him.

And then Horinouchi spoke.

“The headmaster’s spell is a lot like the technique used by Fleur, the Rank 1.”

“I see. Was it that advance information that allowed you to push it back with a barrier spell when you summoned Akerindou?”

“I doubled it and pushed the front barrier with another barrier behind it. Even if the flowers bloom on the front one, it can still be pushed from behind until it explodes. Of course,” she began before sipping at her thick tea and wiping her lips with a *kaishi*. “Once we are near the center of the environment, both of the layers will probably have flowers bloom on them.”

“So you are saying the headmaster also used flowers and explosions as an environment spell?”

“No. She simply scattered flowers from her Magino Device and made the ether around them into the same. That allowed them to be ‘planted’ on other Devices and spells. The natural budding and growth that Fleur uses must be a result of selective breeding.”

“I see,” replied Kagami. “And how did your mother fight that?”

“Well.” Horinouchi nodded and gestured drawing a bowstring while making sure she did not get in Mary’s way next to her. “By speeding up her shells, she hit the headmaster before the headmaster’s spell could get at the shell. That was her only option because Akerindou’s loading area could only create a whole crystallized ether shell at the time, so she could not create multi-stage armored shells.”

“And?” asked Hunter. “In that battle between moms, yours won?”

“Well...”

She trailed off but then gave a clear answer.

“There are no records left of that battle.”

Horinouchi saw the other three frowning.

“I mentioned before that there are no records left of Hexennacht, remember?”

“The eraser, huh?”

If that was what they were calling it, then that was exactly right.

“Yes. When my mother settled her battle with the headmaster, she used a spell that was also effective on Hexennacht. I don’t know if it was created spontaneously or if she had prepared it in advance, but whatever happened there was erased by the Black Witch. So...”

She said it.

“Not even the headmaster herself remembers.”

That is a troublesome trick, thought Kagami.

She sipped some tea to alter the flavor in her mouth and then crossed her arms.

“Would it not be more accurate to say you just do not know where to find it?”

“I think it would be best to work at a way of improving what we already have. Isn’t that more realistic than pursuing some mystery?”

“That is very like you, Horinouchi. And I agree that is best.”

“But,” said Hunter. “They’ve been building that spell up for the last 10 years, haven’t they?”

“Yes,” confirmed Koutarou. “Compared to our old records, the flowers now have countless variations and can bloom anywhere. They are likely attempting to respond to any and all situations.”

“In other words, it has been specialized and changed to perfectly seal off their enemy.”

“But what would happen to the surface if the flowers are detonated while covering half the earth or more?” asked Hunter.

That was a major concern for Hunter whose homeland had been badly damaged.

This meant the intercepting witch could end up doing the same thing.

“The side effects of my shots are pretty bad, but that environment is on another level entirely. It split Tokyo Bay this evening, and it could do the same to

other regions. The Hexennacht witch's goal is to defeat the Black Witch, but that environment spell is trying to do that at all costs."

"It's easy to complain after you've lost," said Mary. But she did not even look in Hunter's direction as she continued. "And as another who lost, I agree. I intend to become a winner, but I refuse to accept monsters."

"This girl sitting across from me is a real pain the ass..."

Those two sure get along, thought Kagami, but something else was bothering her.

"Horinouchi, you seemed to notice something during the battle. What was it?"

"Well, that Rank 1 summoned her Magino Frame without a servant."

That was true. And to go further...

"When we were throwing the garbage out, someone said they had never seen her servant, right?"

"Yes. The sanitation witch did."

Hunter looked up.

"Does that mean she really hasn't been using a servant all this time?"

"...? But she isn't from another world like the brigadier general, right?"

"Might I provide some information concerning that?"

A sudden voice reached them from behind.

Koutarou and the maids quickly turned around to find someone in front of the counter.

The woman was drinking a glass of beer she had taken without asking.

"Lisbeth Lueger?"

Kagami saw Lisbeth raise her glass while wearing a black suit.

"I am honored that one of this world's creators knows my name."

Someone else "broke through" and appeared behind her.

It was the Head Maid.

She had pierced space itself to make an appearance and she held a knife meant for serving food.

The Head Maid first looked to the girls.

“My apologies, milady. It would seem we forgot to monitor the entranceway.”

“You just skipped right past Koutarou, did you not?”

Hearing that, Koutarou looked back, looked to each of the girls, and shook his head.

“No, I don’t mind. Lady Mitsuru is the master here, so I don’t mind at all.”

“It really bothers him, doesn’t it?”

“Mary, putting it like that does the most damage of all.”

But Lisbeth smiled bitterly.

“Explaining why I am here would have been a pain and I doubt you would understand regardless. So I snuck in through the main entrance, stealthily used the central elevator, and held my breath as I walked down the middle of the hallway. And to resupply for my infiltration, I am drinking a beer. Stealth is a lot of work, you see.”

Hunter glared at Horinouchi who waved her hands back and forth when she noticed.

“N-not everyone I know is like this.”

“That is right, Hunter. Everyone Horinouchi knows is an innocent saint. Right, Manko?”

“You be quiet!”

But laughter followed.

It was Lisbeth. She ignored the knife at her throat and brought the glass to her mouth.

“So you can smile now, Mitsuru?”

“I was angry. Weren’t you watching?”

“If you can get angry, you can smile. But if you ‘smile’, you can also hide your anger.”

She stepped forward as she said that.

But the Head Maid did not pull back the knife at her throat. She gathered strength to hold her hand in place as a warning not to move.

“What a dull blade.”

But Lisbeth continued forward regardless.

Her neck passed through the knife.

“An illusion?” asked Hunter.

But it was not. A closer look showed what had happened. There was a cut through Lisbeth’s neck.

No blood or anything else flowed out, but there was a definite pulse there.

“This is spatial cutting. I am not embarrassed to cut myself at this age.”

“I’m glad to see you’re still so healthy.”

“Yes.” Lisbeth stopped next to the girls. “Now, then.”

Just as a will-o’-the-wisp servant appeared on her shoulder, a Normal Device jutted out from her hand.

Mary immediately stood up.

“How dare you...!”

She raised her voice, but Lisbeth was looking straight at Kagami.

And the woman spoke calmly with the straight sword still held vertically.

“You have good instincts. You have supposedly seen hundreds of worlds fall into ruin and now I can see that’s likely true.”

“I’m honored you think so.”

Kagami remained seated, but her right hand was casually extended overhead. The fingers seemed to be grabbing something in midair, but...

...Don't tell me...

Ether light sprayed out in a horizontal line. It moved from the window to Lisbeth with Kagami's raised hand in the middle.

After the ether light scattered, something appeared there.

"A Normal Device..."

"My Dragoon is a double sword."

It was obvious now what Lisbeth had done. As soon as the first sword had appeared, she had cut space too quickly to be seen and hidden the other sword there.

"I cut it quite thinly, but I must be getting old if you saw through it."

"No, you can chalk that one up to me being awesome."

"This girl..." muttered Horinouchi before standing up.

...Eh?

Mary turned toward Horinouchi in confusion and saw her brushing her long hair back with a hand.

"So did Kagami pass your 'test'? Then what do you want, Aunt Lisbeth? ...If you aren't just here to play around, do you have something to show us?"

"You could tell?"

"You said we would not understand if you explained why you are here, so I assume you want some of our time. Where do you intend to take us?"

The maids tensed, but the corners of Lisbeth's mouth rose. The smile was more of satisfaction than amusement.

"Mitsuru, you really are clever. So let's get going."

"Again, where to?"

Horinouchi asked again and looked the woman in the eye. The European U.A.H. Representative used her thumb to point to the north behind her.

"It isn't far. ...There's something I should show you. Here in this academy."

Chapter 11: And the Truth

第十一章

『そして真実だ』

真実が奥にあるのではなく
中心方向にあるのは
地球が丸いからだろうか

The truth is not in the depths

It is in the center

Is that because the earth is round?

Hunter was unsure whether or not she should go with them, but she ended up doing so.

...I wonder what the others would say if they knew I was hanging out with the European U.A.H. Representative.

She checked and found the 7th Fleet had taken the range of the Rank 1's spell into account, so they had chosen to stop in the ocean off of Chiba instead of landing at Yokosuka. Thanks to that, they would not arrive until past 3 AM, but...

...Does that mean they can provide backup during the Ranker Battle at 4?

Depending on how the Rank 1's spell spread this time, they could be restricted from taking off from and landing at the bases on land. If the Rank 1's environment covered all of Kantou, they might not even be able to communicate with Yokosuka, Yokota, and Atsugi.

In that case, the 7th Fleet out at sea would have to immediately relay the satellite information as a general HQ.

The crew was likely making sure everything was set up for that in the fleet command room.

"If the flowers bloom on ether, we'll have to go with physical objects. Look, the orbits of 3 satellites fit our needs, so can't we drop them down on her? Once they accelerate, she won't be able to escape."

"So it would be the US army's first meteor strike!? I like it! Hey, bring out another round of drinks!"

Hunter decided to forget she saw that.

At any rate, Lisbeth unsurprisingly brought them out into the night, but where they went next was unexpected. The European U.A.H. Magino Devices still surrounded the school, but...

“Are we not leaving the campus?”

“This is the courtyard...isn't it?”

Based on Horinouchi and Kagami's speed as they walked out ahead of Hunter and Mary, they did not know where they were being taken either.

But it was apparently within the campus where they lived.

As they walked north, they occasionally passed some students who were out to get some food or drinks.

...Is that where we're going?

Hunter somehow knew the answer. It was the center of the school. The structure at the center of the courtyard.

There was a clearing with a radius of 50 meters and the building in the center resembled a bell tower.

“The underground mausoleum?”

“Why are you taking us here?”

Kagami looked around while listening to Horinouchi's question.

They were walking down a corridor with a width and height of 5 meters and bluish-white sterilization divine protection lights on the ceiling.

The walls and everything else were white, but the large lace pattern carved into the walls was likely an emblem providing a divine protection that ensured peace for the souls laid to rest here. But...

...I thought the underground mausoleum's entrance was locked.

She had looked around to a certain extent after transferring in.

“Are you allowed entrance here?” she asked Lisbeth.

“This place was originally built by me...no, by us.”

“I see.”

“You mentioned Fleur's servant before, didn't you? There is something I would like to show you concerning that. As a 'guest'.”

Their surroundings changed. Rows of gold-colored bronze doors appeared along the walls.

Each of the doors was positioned at waist height. They were about 1 meter tall and 30 centimeters wide.

The ornamented single doors had a relief and a name engraved in them.

“Graves for ashes? But who do they belong to?”

How many of them were there? The corridor seemed to continue forever, but Lisbeth answered without turning back.

“Those who, in death, wished for the safety of this world were chosen. If you have officially joined this academy, then you will visit this place each year.”

“Yes.” Horinouchi spoke quietly. “This place is for the people who died during the previous Hexennacht.”

Horinouchi realized Kagami was looking her way while walking alongside her.

“Horinouchi. If your mother is here, I should have bought some flowers to greet her.”

“Brigadier General! If you need some, I can go buy them!”

“That will not be necessary,” insisted Horinouchi.

“You can only say that because you must be bringing her flowers regularly.”

Was Kagami praising her or teasing her?

...Probably the latter.

But after turning a few corners, the passageway curved and the doors vanished from the walls. Then some paint drew yellow diagonal lines at their feet.

“Aunt Lisbeth? We’re leaving the area for guests.”

“Stop calling me ‘aunt’. And I am well aware of that.”

She pointed forward.

A metal door covered the full width of the corridor.

It was labeled “Off Limits Zone” and Lisbeth raised her right hand in front of it. She held a card key.

“Only a handful of people have one of these. From here on, I will be a formal guest.”

With that, she stuck the card in a slot on the door and slid it down.

“Now, then.”

The door did not open.

After a while, she looked back in front of the unmoving door.

“Hm?”

She tilted her head and repeated the action a few times, but the door still did not budge.

Of the 4 girls watching, Horinouchi looked back at the other 3 who nodded.

“Aunt, that isn’t the reader’s slot; it’s just a gap in the device. So...”

She grabbed the card away from Lisbeth and pressed it against the sensor. A chime rang.

“Thank you for using our card.”

The electronic voice seemed a little off, but Lisbeth took a breath and spoke.

“I knew that. I really did. ...What’s that look for, Mitsuru? You don’t believe me, do you!?”

“That’s right, Manko. Starting today, you need to be an honest Manko.”

“You be quiet!!”

But the door slowly opened. A chill reached them from what was revealed on the other side.

“A large room?”

The round room there was dark and still.

Horinouchi followed Lisbeth into what could be called a great hall and only

then realized how dark it was.

The room was about 15 meters across. There were bluish-white lights on the walls and ceiling. There was also a faint light coming from a raised platform in the center of the floor. The only other light came from...

“Glowing plants.”

Hearing Hunter’s comment, Horinouchi realized there were indeed plants covering the walls and floor.

And the flowers growing from them were glowing enough to faintly illuminate their surroundings.

It was enough to make the floor more black than dark and for the angle of illumination to reveal the shape of the walls and ceiling.

Then Horinouchi realized Lisbeth had sped up in front of them. She was walking toward the center of the hall.

“So it really has weakened this much...”

Wondering what she meant, Horinouchi walked through the ankle-deep plants and found a servant at the edge of the light in the center.

“A flower dragon!”

It was a white dragon formed from white lily-like petals. Some red provided an accent on the edges of the petals.

...How rare.

She had memories of the Headmaster using one, so...

“This might be Fleur’s servant.”

“No, it’s too far away from the battle this evening. And it doesn’t seem prepared for remote support.”

The flower dragon noticed them, but it remained in the center of the hall and simply turned around. Horinouchi began to approach it, but Kagami called out to her from behind.

“Wait, Horinouchi. Look to your feet.”

She did so. In another step, she would have reached a shallow fence of climbing roses. It was not even 30 cm tall or thick, but there was something contained inside the fence.

It was a glass-covered coffin. And...

“————”

When she looked down, she saw a familiar face. The eyes were closed and it was entire devoid of motion.

“The Headmaster...?”

“What is this...?”

Horinouchi’s downward gaze saw roses filling the glass box.

And a metal plate was installed above the Headmaster’s head.

The given date was the end of October from 10 years ago.

...The day of Hexennacht.

She thought about what this meant, but...

“It can’t be. She’s only sleeping, right? I mean...”

When she looked back down below the glass, she noticed something.

In the rose-filled coffin, the Headmaster’s body was hidden by a sheet, but the shape visible through the sheet was not that of a whole body.



Kagami stood next to Lisbeth who had taken a half step behind Horinouchi.

“What is the meaning of this, Lisbeth?”

“You can’t tell?”

“I can take a guess, but I would like to hear it from someone who knows.”

“Is that so?” Lisbeth’s shoulders drooped. “My friend Shihouin Cerisier died that night. ...She died taking out the Black Witch’s minions who would have otherwise killed me.”

The servant known as a flower dragon looked up at them and fidgeted like it did not know what to do. Lisbeth narrowed her eyes toward it and continued speaking.

“She believed we would win the battle. And, Mitsuru, she believed that your mother would be safe...so on the verge of death, she made a promise. She said she wanted to fill the world with flowers to erase the scars of the battle. When we were still trainees, she had always looked after the flower garden.”

“That’s really surprising...”

“That is very harsh, Horinouchi.”

“I-I meant the part about my mother!”

On the other side, Hunter lightly spun her right arm as a sign to “wrap it up”, so Kagami gave her an OK sign and spoke.

“But what happened after that?”

“Things might have been different if she could have spoken with her child like Horinouchi...like Mitsuyo did. After we preserved her body, we returned to find her in her home.”

Someone who should have been dead had returned home. In that case...

“A ghost?”

“No, it was her ‘regrets’ given physical form. Think of it like a tape imprinted with her will.”

Kagami raised her right hand when she heard the word “tape”.

She looked at the others to find Horinouchi and Hunter had tilted their heads too.

“Tape?”

“Then an MD...”

Kagami knew that one, so she raised her hand, but the other three were still tilting their heads.

Lisbeth cleared her throat.

“...A memory card?”

“Let us go with that.”

When the others nodded, Lisbeth turned around and forcefully struck the empty air with her Normal Device.

“Dammit!”

Hunter and the others stepped back in surprise, so Kagami held her palms forward to calm them.

“The generation gap is always cruel. We too will age like that eventually, so we must make sure we do not end up like her.”

“Kagami, you’re not helping her by saying that.”

She turned back around to find Lisbeth glaring at her and sighing. Finally, she opened her mouth again.

“At its foundation, her spell contains the concept of ‘growth’. In other words, ‘life’. So just before she died, she took a mold of her life and imprinted it with her remaining life force.”

“What does that mean?”

“She used her body as a vessel to allow her regrets to remain in this world.” Horinouchi looked up as she explained. “That means the Headmaster we’ve met was only her regrets, doesn’t it?”

“It does. That was Shihouin’s final spell. It is only because of her immense power that it has been able to exist at a nearly physical density for so long. This is where the vessel is stored. But her will and memories were clear enough to see

herself as *the real one*, so we allowed it and worked as 'her' backup. But..."

Lisbeth looked to the slowly fading light of the glowing plants on the walls.

"Her life used to shine brightly in here, but it has grown so weak."

She looked between Kagami and Horinouchi.

"So I have a request."

"I will hear it."

"Heh." Lisbeth laughed without a smile on her face and then she told them.

"Defeat her daughter Fleur and free the two of them."

When she heard that, Horinouchi realized why Lisbeth had brought them here.

...She said it had to do with why Fleur never showed her servant...

The flower dragon looked up from the floor and tried to always keep a certain distance from them. But...

"Are you saying Fleur's servant isn't the flower dragon here..."

"This flower dragon is Cerisier's servant. Fleur's servant is..."

Horinouchi did not need to hear the rest of that sentence.

"The Headmaster is Fleur's servant, isn't she?"

"Wait."

Kagami suddenly uttered that single word.

She held her right hand forward and looked to Lisbeth.

"Does Fleur know this?"

"Of course. Cerisier gave herself and her great power to Fleur so that she might survive the next Hexennacht. And those two have improved on their spell and fought until they reached this point. So Fleur thinks that as long as she continues being a 'good girl' by fighting and winning, she will never lose her mother. But..."

Lisbeth indicated their surroundings with a sweep of her hand.

“At this rate, Cerisier’s soul will be worn down until it disappears. If she participates in Hexennacht, I doubt it will last. ...It is only just barely holding on now.”

“So if we defeat Fleur in the Ranker Battle, it will remove the Headmaster’s need to protect Fleur and Fleur’s need to be protected?”

“Yes.” Lisbeth nodded. “That is why I am here. To free my friend’s soul after I once accepted this situation and thus bound her to it. I once told her to live, but now I am cruelly telling her to die. ...However, she was never one to do what I said. And she isn’t now either.”

“So that is it.”

Horinouchi heard Kagami mutter those words.

She looked over to see Kagami raise her index finger and point at Lisbeth as if striking at the air.

“The Lady Headmaster said she would not welcome you as an academy official as long as she held the position of Headmaster. ...She understands the situation as well, doesn’t she?”

Meaning...

“If she disappears, she will give that position to you.”

When Horinouchi heard that, a few things clicked into place inside her.

...That’s right.

That exchange had indeed occurred that evening.

Lisbeth, the instigator of the battle, had hesitated and the Headmaster had chosen to accept the battle.

So...

“Does the Headmaster wish to protect her daughter Fleur and to achieve victory on Hexennacht? Or does she wish to lose and free Fleur from this conflict?”

“Fleur should actually understand this too. But...”

“Yes,” agreed Horinouchi.

She had lost her own mother, but her mother had not left any regrets.

...I wonder why not.

If she had known about Fleur and the Headmaster’s relationship at the time, would she have been jealous?

But at this point she was not.

She had once refused to look up at the moon due to her grudge over losing her mother, but that had changed.

Was Fleur able to look up at the moon alongside her mother’s regret? No, it seemed different somehow whether she was able to or not, but was that only because Horinouchi was arrogantly rejecting the possibility that others were happy?

“Horinouchi,” said Kagami. “Fleur has realized the truth...just like you did. But she refuses to accept it, so she refuses to look down even as she walks along a bridge that will eventually come to an abrupt end.”

“Isn’t it arrogant of us to shove her off of that bridge?”

“Then what would you do?”

Horinouchi tried to answer that question, but...

“———”

No words came out.

She had expected herself to say something clever, but...

...I don’t know.

“That is fine.” Kagami looked her straight in the eye. “After all, you have never seen someone being placed in the same circumstances you used to be in.”

And...

“When that happens, will you turn her into what you used to be or will you be able to make her what you are now? You need to think about what you will do.”

“D-don’t act like you know everything.”

But she understood what Kagami was saying.

She did not know if they could defeat the Rank 1, but the light of the plants around them did not lie.

The Headmaster’s soul was at its limit. And since Shinto dealt with souls and she was its representative...

“Putting it to rest is my job...”

“Yeah.” Hunter crossed her arms behind her head. “We’ve got a copy using the Headmaster’s soul as fuel and someone who’s grown dependent on that copy even though she knows it’s a lie. ...But even though the copy isn’t sure this is the right thing to do, she continues wearing down the soul for the daughter that adores her. We can’t let this keep going.”

“Then Horinouchi. ...Let us stop this. If she vanishes, nothing at all will remain.”

“...Can you make it in time?”

Mary’s narrowed eyes were lowered toward the glowing plants. She was likely using the amount of light to calculate out their master’s amount of ether. And the look on her face was not promising. But...

“I do not know. Whether we do or not depends on what happens next,” clearly stated Kagami. “But as things are, we will be forced to see her die a second time. And this time, she will truly leave nothing behind.”

So...

“We will stop this. It is necessary for our own ambitions, but what comes after that is up to those two.”

Moonlight filled the courtyard.

Oh, dear, thought Headmaster Cerisier. *I never liked the moon because it reminds me of Hexennacht, but when I’m with Fleur, I’m more worried about her.*

Fleur did not fear the moon.

It was unclear if that was due to her mother's presence or just part of her personality.

But when she let the moonlight wash over her in the flower garden where everything looked white and dark blue...

"How pretty, Fleur."

"Mama, you would already know that if you didn't refuse to go out at night." Fleur spread her arms in front of the blossoming flowers. "I picked up all the trash today to make it nice and pretty! See? Look, mama! I looked after them, so they're blooming so much this year!"

The flowers continued as far as the girl could spread her arms and as far as the eye could see, but had the garden always been this large?

She had forgotten after only viewing it from above for so long.

...That's right.

This was late in coming, but she was glad she had come to learn this now. In the past, her daughter had barely been able to look after the potted plants in the house, but now she could make all this.

A smile naturally came to her lips.

"How pretty, Fleur. I hope they can continue blooming forever."

"Don't worry! If I do what you say, the flowers will never wither! They'll continue spreading forever! And...oh, I know! If I defeat the Black Witch, you won't have to fear anything anymore, right!?"

"Fear...?"

"That's right!"

Fleur walked over and looked up at her.

She grabbed her mother's hands, shook them up and down, and spoke with a smile.

"Like worrying about leaving me all alone!"

"That..."

That was her regret. It was the worry that had prevented her from leaving this world.

...If Mitsuyo was here, she would probably scold me over that...

She had to smile bitterly in her heart at that. And it was concern over this that had brought Lisbeth here.

She had built up her current surroundings in an attempt to not worry anyone, but now she was certain her current friend and the friend in her memories were worried.

I'm a failure of a Headmaster, she thought as Fleur tilted her head in front of her.

"Mama, is something worrying you?"

"Yes. ...I'm worried whether or not you can be a good girl, Fleur."

"Then don't worry."

Because...

"I'll defeat the Black Witch, so then we can be together and I won't have to be alone, mama! So if I'm ever not a good girl, scold me and correct me. If you keep doing that forever, I'll always be a good girl! So..."

Her daughter looked in a certain direction: the heavens.

The Rank 1 spoke with the moonlight filling her eyes.

"I'll have another challenger tomorrow morning, but this is sure to be the last one. Mama, let's win this together and then go defeat the Black Witch, okay!?"

After leaving the mausoleum, Hunter realized how terribly exhausted she was.

...Even if you can't see them, there are things like ghosts and regrets there...

Horinouchi must have noticed because she slapped them each on the shoulder in turn. The sound was louder than the hit felt, which Hunter found impressive, but...

...Oh.

“That lightened me up more than I expected, Horinouchi,” said Kagami. “I could use one of those next time my shoulders are feeling stiff.”

“This has more to do with your mood.”

Meanwhile, Lisbeth raised a hand.

Hunter and the others also raised a hand, so the woman smiled bitterly.

“That should be enough. Don’t hold back in the battle tomorrow morning, okay?”

“If you will be monitoring the battle, be careful. Her attack is indiscriminate.”

“True enough.” Lisbeth turned around and walked toward the main gate on her own. “Hurry to bed, children.”

“You just had to say that, didn’t you?” muttered Hunter, but the woman was already gone.

A few of the distant Magino Devices were changing position.

“What is that?”

“Oh, I got some information from Atsugi saying an additional 300 witches are arriving from Europe, so those are probably guiding them in.”

“So Lisbeth truly intends to protect this place, does she?” asked Kagami.

“I suppose so,” agreed Hunter.

When she pointed toward the General Division dorm and began to walk, everyone followed.

There had been some lingering summer heat when she had fought Mary near here the other day.

But now the air felt chilly.

The season was changing and Hexennacht would be here by the time the moon changed.

It’s all happening so fast, she thought before speaking.

“The European politicians probably really did want to control this place. I think European U.A.H. used that as bait to get the EU and NATO to mass-produce

those Magino Devices. But European U.A.H. actually wanted to make Hexennacht inviolable.”

“But if the politicians had taken the initiative, things could really have gone in the direction they want.”

“Yes, and that’s why the witches had to make a show of taking Shihouin Academy themselves. I bet that’s what the 1000 Magino Devices were for.”

It had been a largescale bluff. And...

“That means this place is worth that much.”

With those words, they entered a small plaza. It was known as the vending machine plaza. Mary took a step forward.

“What would you like?”

“Some kind of fruit juice,” answered Horinouchi. “Do you want a soda, Kagami?”

“I feel like tea.”

“Then I’ll have a soda,” said Hunter.

Mary also chose a soda.

All 4 of them sat at different seats at about the same time.

Also at about the same time, they all opened their drinks and started drinking. Kagami was the first to speak this time.

“I feel like we should perhaps just leave them be. Is that just me being soft?”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Horinouchi.

“Even if she is a fake, that Lady Headmaster is real to Fleur. And in way, she is real to me since I never knew the original one. So...”

Someone interrupted her as she looked up toward the sky.

Unsurprisingly, it was Horinouchi.

“You are too kind, Kagami.”

Hunter understood enough to agree.

In front of the streetlights and vending machine lights, Horinouchi smiled a little and looked to Kagami.

“And do you think you can win?”

“As long as I have you with me, there is no way I can lose.”

Kagami tried to distract her with a counterattack, but even as Horinouchi blushed, she sighed to lower her angrily raised shoulders.

She lightly shook her hair and spoke to Kagami.

“Kagami, if you are unsure of something tomorrow, just leave it to me. I too know the Headmaster quite well. ...Although maybe I shouldn't say that when I didn't know what she really was.”

After their short break in the courtyard, the 4 girls headed back while holding a quick strategy meeting. After that, Kagami and Horinouchi settled down for some sleep, Hunter started for Atsugi, and Mary took up a position on the General Division dorm rooftop as a guard.

And at 4 AM the following morning, Horinouchi, Kagami, Fleur, and the Headmaster gathered in front of the main gate. On the Headmaster's signal, they flew into the northern sky.

Lisbeth had to watch them go and she waved from the main gate to Mary who was on top of the General Division dorm.

“I suppose it would be a good idea for my unit to join forces with America. Preventing any other countries from acting would likely be best for Hexennacht.”

Yes.

“We are recovering from 10 years ago. I will not let anyone else interfere.”

Chapter 12: Flowers Blossom in the World

第十二章

『世界に花が咲く』



咲かせば戻れぬ夜舞台
仰ぐか散らすか鉄火の指先

Once you blossom on that night stage, there is no turning back Those gunfire fingertips will either look up or scatter

The battlefield was established in a location Horinouchi had not expected.

They were currently flying approximately 5000 meters above Kasumigaura.

Due to the previous Hexennacht, Kasumigaura had become a region of large lakes. During this period near autumn, the temperature difference between the air and water as dawn approached created fog.

There were clouds in the sky and they flew above those.

“Kh...”

Fleur flew out ahead while putting up a surprisingly good fight.

Flowers scattered from her and, when Horinouchi and Kagami fired back...

“Oh, dear.”

The Headmaster, who wore a dress and flew alongside the girl, had her daughter dodge.

...What is with this three-legged-race situation!?

One of them handled attacking while the other handled dodging. They both only had to focus on their own task, so they were more efficient than Horinouchi and Kagami.

Horinouchi considered ignoring them and summoning her Magino Device, but...

“Horinouchi! Suppress your urge to destroy! It is too soon for that!”

“Y-you could phrase that differently!”

But she did understand what Kagami meant. The lakes of Kasumigaura spread out below, but she could see the lights of human civilization on the eastern coast.

There were not many of them and the most noticeable were the streetlights of the coastal road.

There was one spot where it flourished, like a road relay station.

“The Headmaster and Fleur haven’t summoned their Magino Frame because they want to avoid getting them involved.”

“Horinouchi, do you have any guesses as to where they are headed?”

That would be awfully convenient, she thought, but then she realized she did.

Koutarou had investigated a few things connected to the Horinouchi family.

“The Headmaster is working to reconstruct the destroyed regions in northern Kantou. A 50-kilometer area of land in north Ibaraki had its terrain entirely changed and we practiced there during the summer of our second year.”

“How did that training go?”

“When firing from one end to the other, I hit with 29 out of 30 shots.”

“...And where’d the 1 you missed end up?” cut in Hunter via spell circle.

That interruption must have meant things were ready on her end.

“Are you there?”

“I just arrived with the others in the ocean off of Boso. I’m being inspected, but what’s this? Are you moving north?”

“Yes,” confirmed Horinouchi as something like a glowing cloud appeared.

It was the flower explosive spell. They were supposedly still moving to the battlefield, but...

...We can’t exactly complain if they settle this here!

With that in mind, Horinouchi responded to Hunter. They were not just “moving”.

“We’re in battle!”

It was still night in the sky.

The 3 girls were equipped with their Normal Frames and the woman wore a dress. They attacked and defended while continuing north.

The pursuing Holy Knight and Shrine Maiden had the Holy Knight charge in with her sword while the Shrine Maiden provided covering fire from behind.

But the arrows she fired were not just meant to attack.

While pursuing the flower witch whose high-speed path took on a square wave shape as she jerked to the side, she fired a combination of homing and straight-line shells.

But the flower witch and her dress-clad servant did not just let the arrows reach them.

The flower witch swung the hoe-shaped Device in midair and spun her own body to scatter flowers around her.

They flew along paths not even she could predict and their innumerable quantity struck her pursuers.

But those 2 did not care.

A few of the launched arrows expanded in midair to form three-arrow barriers. They lost their momentum, but they collided with the stream of flowers and scattered the explosions.

And the few arrows that flew between them detonated on their own.

Ether light burst and detonated the flowers caught in the blast.

“I can cast explosion spells on my arrows too!”

Kagami was impressed at how well Horinouchi’s rapid-fire shots cleared a path.

Firing so often would usually drastically lower one’s mobility.

But during the battle against Hunter, in the beginning of the battle against Mary, and during their own battle with their Normal Devices, she had indeed managed to keep up with the flow of battle even as she fired.

...Is it the Suzaku servant that provides her mobility even as she fires!?

The technical accumulation from the previous versions of Akerindou likely helped a lot too.

Thus, Kagami focused on lowering the burden on Horinouchi.

She continued targeting Fleur up ahead while firing down the center to reduce the total number of flowers coming her way. And she moved forward.

“Here goes...!”

When she raised her voice, her opponent had to target her.

The flower storm was almost impossible to control, but Fleur had likely given it vague directionality. And if that was headed her way, it was easy to intercept.

“...!”

She could also fly up, down, left or right to an area of thinner distribution.

Countless flowers were launched like a great mass of smoke. She detonated those, slipped through the gaps, and continued forward. And...

“Horinouchi!”

As soon as she called the name, an arrow flew over her shoulder and detonated the flowers in front of her.

The blast reverberated in her body and echoed inside her.

Her opponent was riding the wind and ether to send out explosives, so she rode her pulse and her blood flow to continue forward.

And she did so.

She accelerated down the path opened by Horinouchi’s blast and she saw the enemy.

They were there.

It was Fleur and the Headmaster.

The flower witch noticed her and tried to swing her hoe back.

But she was too slow.

Those two were a single pair splitting the roles of offense and defense, but Kagami and Horinouchi were two individuals playing to their individual strengths. If they fit well together, they could pull off double the attacks.

Even if their enemies were trying to strike back...

“We can intervene!”

Kagami fired first.

Just before Fleur could launch an attack from her swinging hoe, Dikaiosyne fired.

Headmaster Cerisier realized she was actually able to enjoy a battle for the first time in forever.

...It's so nice being able to move around like this.

Being pursued by her official duties in the headmaster's office had been fun in its own way.

Everything was fun. It was much more fun than dying in her regrets and not being able to do anything.

And at the moment, she was embracing her daughter's shoulders and having her fall back.

Kagami was quite good.

It was obvious the girl really had traversed many worlds. She likely had more combat experience than Cerisier herself. After all, her combination with Horinouchi was clever.

Against only Horinouchi, it would likely have begun and ended with a simple push and pull, but Kagami added her own timing and proactive style to it.

This should have been an artillery battle where the number of attacks determined everything, but she was predicting their actions to transform it into a martial arts battle.

She was targeting the daughter's actions.

Cerisier and her daughter were splitting the offensive and defensive roles. Her daughter focused on offense while she assisted with that, dodged, and defended.

Their roles were clear, so they could draw out their full power and speed.

But that meant they only had a single person attacking.

They were not really working together.

They had fought some previous Ranker Battles with a Buddy System element to them. Their two opponents had indeed worked as a team then.

But those opponents had used a mistaken sort of teamwork. They had formed a single team with one of them assisting the other, so they either had just the one person attacking or had both of them fire at the same time for double the attacks.

But Kagami and Horinouchi worked together in a different way.

Their attacks had started out simple enough, but they were not ending.

That was partially because Horinouchi could keep up her rapid-fire for long periods of time, but Kagami was filling in the gaps to make sure their attacks truly were constant.

So Cerisier would move her daughter in order to alter the timing at which their enemy's attacks arrived. That transformed the unending shots into scattered shots that were not quite aimed right.

But Kagami made up for that.

In order to attack, Cerisier was shifting the timing at which their opponents' attacks hit, but then Kagami instructed Horinouchi to fire on Fleur's attacks.

The trouble grew when Fleur briefly stopped attacking. She had to resume her firing pose and the time that took was wasted.

The enemy used that time to get closer and attack even more.

It was the same now. Their attack was intercepted, that gap opened a path, and Kagami would fire before having Horinouchi begin her rapid-fire along the new firing line.

Horinouchi was firing from behind her, but Kagami would readily change her course, which Cerisier could only call impressive. That was likely because Horinouchi knew exactly where to fire.

...I accepted the Buddy System for these girls, but it looks like that was the right decision.

Those 2 were getting closer. Fleur had no choice but to scatter ashes in the air and dot the sky with flowers.

But then she spoke unexpectedly.

“It’ll be okay, mama. I just have to go where you said to, right?”

“Yes, go there and everything will be okay.”

“I can’t wait...!”

Cerisier was delighted to sense anticipation and no concern in that voice.

...My daughter doesn’t hold any unneeded fear of fighting.

She faced forward while well aware that worked against them at the moment.
So...

“—————”

It’s about time we made our real attack, she thought.

It was a simple thing.

Cerisier had been watching Kagami and Horinouchi’s actions this entire time.

She knew that the two of them were trying to eliminate the timing for Fleur’s attacks and that it started with Kagami.

So she intervened.

“Fleur.”

Her call got through. Kagami and Horinouchi were not the only ones who could use the Buddy System. So she added something extra to Fleur’s attacks. She did so right after dodging Kagami’s shot.

“...!”

She had Fleur fire a hoe shot as they spun around.

Kagami saw the attack.

The counterattack after dodging had been quite rushed.

That showed just how cornered those two were feeling, but...

...Our attack won't make it in time!

Kagami had only just fired. Horinouchi's rapid-fire attack would begin next, but that was not going to arrive in time. That suggested that the Chancellor had been observing them carefully while handling the dodging, but...

"Kh..."

Kagami dodged and opened a path for Horinouchi to attack.

Due to their relative speeds, the flowers launched as a counterattack would reach her, but that would open a hole before they reached Horinouchi, preventing this from being an obstacle for her.

That meant Kagami had to deal with this on her own. Meaning...

"Bear with it...!"

As soon as she thought that, she saw movement.

Their opponent had spun around in their position 70 meters ahead.

She could tell they were rotating because it was a horizontal attack from the hoe-shaped Device. But the way it made that rotation was odd.

A single rotation should have been a compact action, but it had yet to release its flower attack and...

...The rotation is oddly large!?

That question was immediately followed by understanding thanks to their own Buddy System. In other words...

"Are they doing it too!?"

It was Fleur and the Headmaster.

The rotation of the hoe-shaped Device was not an attack.

It was Fleur and the Headmaster swapping out their roles. And thus...

"———"

The movement of the rotation was small, but then it suddenly grew indiscernible.

Kagami recalled when that girl had casually slipped past them on the way to throw out the trash.

She had not fought the flow of her surroundings, she had ridden on that flow, and she had been pushed through.

It had been perfectly visible, but they had suddenly found her beyond their own flow of movement. So even though they had seen her, they had been slow to comprehend it.

Those two had done that here. Also...

“Take this.”

The Headmaster scattered ashes with a smile. Unlike with Fleur, it did not float out over a wide area.

...It's bundled together!?

The bundle of ashes was too thick to call a spear and it spiraled toward Kagami. It transformed into flowers in midair and those spread out with their spiral trajectory intact.

They did not entirely rule over that space, but this attack crashed into an opponent's defenses and momentum.

It spread out before Kagami in no time at all.

“Superb.”

As soon as she said that, the explosion erupted.

Fleur thought their movement had put a large distance between them and their opponents.

“Mama!”

As soon as she *traded places* with her mother, the sound of the life-bringing explosions reverberated toward her. But it could not keep up with them and ended as a strange rumbling.

...Amazing, mama!

Fleur had been unable to hit this opponent, but her mother had done it in a single shot. But...

“Mama, what is it?”

Her mother was still staring behind them. And she had already launched her next attack and a third one after that.

“Mama!?”

Fleur was briefly baffled why her mother would do that.

They had moved out ahead and one of their enemies had been defeated. As proof, the staged chain-reaction of explosion flowers was detonating behind them.

She could not imagine someone escaping that unharmed. But...

...Eh?

Something split through the explosion light.

It was not the Holy Knight. It was three overlapping arrows extending in three different directions. It was the shrine maiden witch’s defensive shot.

“She counterattacked in time!?”

Horinouchi felt a mental cold sweat as she faced the Headmaster’s multi-stage detonating flower spear.

...I just barely made it in time!

She and Kagami had failed to predict the Headmaster and Fleur swapping roles, but the switch had created a slight gap.

Was she supposed to view that gap as an opening or as a danger?

She had settled on the latter. For one thing, Kagami would have charged in on her own if it was an opening. She knew she could leave that to Kagami, so she had chosen defense. She had fired a three-arrow shell along the course Kagami had indicated.

“That was a close one!”

The Headmaster had not held back and her attack had been impressive. In order to suppress the entire area, Fleur would let the flowers float out before they expanded, but the Headmaster had sent them in a corkscrew shape before having them expand.

...How badly did she want to send out those explosives?

But Horinouchi had defended against it. There were 2 more shots coming, but...

“Kagami! Dodge...!”

They needed to change their course.

For one thing, the Headmaster’s first shot had not been fully eliminated. It had been sent in like a spear, so it had not all exploded.

And the three-arrow defense would not last forever. It would either shatter from the explosions or burst from the flowers that blossomed on it.

Besides, at their speed, they would quickly surpass the three-arrow defense she had shot forward. So...

Kagami, you need to change your course in a hurry!”

As soon as she shouted that, she saw something reckless.

Kagami accelerated right into the opened three-arrow barrier and kicked it out of the way.

...What does she think she’s doing!?

She understood well enough to ask it like that.

Cerisier saw it.

...Ah!?

The explosion she had sent their way had been kicked back her way.

She was familiar with the three-arrow defense spell. Horinouchi’s mother, Mitsuyo, had used it often. It was an excellent spell that could be held up by

hand or fired as a shell. It expanded only after being activated and thus maintained its high speed while a shell, so she had known it could be sent into the middle of their exchange of fire. But...

...Did she kick it!?

The wall of explosions was pushed back by the three-arrow shape and then flew straight toward her after reaching a certain point.

It had clearly been kicked or something similar, but she still had a question.

...Why hasn't it been destroyed!?

No, there was no point in wondering that. That girl could create things from ether as she saw fit, so...

“Did she replenish the ether and recreate it even as she kicked it away!?”

As soon as Cerisier shouted that, the second flower spear reached her opponents and collided with three arrows. But once again...

“Ohh...!”

Kagami gave a cry as something collided with it. And a moment later...

...I was right!

The shape of the three-arrow wall appeared in the explosion and it was pushed back Cerisier's way.

Kagami accelerated.

She did not get many opportunities to kick things in midair, but she needed to use everything in her arsenal for this exchange of offense and defense.

...And this is especially useful while using our Normal Devices!

She wanted to settle this in their Normal states if at all possible. That was just how difficult Fleur's Magino Device would be to deal with.

The Headmaster's attack had been superbly timed, but she had still managed to respond.

...Because I had heard her spell is different than Fleur's!

The environmental aspect of the spell had only been introduced in Fleur's generation. The Headmaster's had not reached the point of growing flowers on the target object.

Kagami would have been in trouble if the Headmaster had shared that new trait as Fleur's servant.

But if that were the case, they would have no reason for dividing their roles. The Headmaster had let Fleur handle offense because she had decided her daughter was the superior attacker.

And Kagami's understanding of that had given her this opportunity.

"The 3rd shot...!"

She broke through the explosion and accelerated.

Her distance from the 2 in front of her rapidly shrank.

On the early morning rooftop, Mary realized that Hunter was relaying the data to her.

She operated the communication spell circle to check the data from multiple radars and other surveillance data.

The 4 combatants seemed to be rapidly flying north in southern Ibaraki.

"Kagami just kicked right through the explosion spell...!" exclaimed Hunter.

She's as crazy as ever, isn't she? briefly thought Mary before a more positive voice arrived over the spell circle.

"Well done, Lady Kagami!"

That must be how you praise people in this world, she belatedly realized.

"Ohh...!"

After breaking through the shattering light, Kagami approached Fleur and the Headmaster.

The Headmaster had fired a 4th attack, but Kagami was already close enough

to move around it.

She kicked off of Horinouchi's three arrows to slightly change her trajectory and to accelerate.

She shifted her acceleration field fully forward to cancel out the air resistance. And as soon as she arrived in front of her opponents, she swung Dikaiosyne forward.

But just before that, Fleur spun around in front of her.

They were switching attacker and defender roles. However...

"Too late...!"

Kagami cried out and sent her attack right into the hoe Device.

Sparks flew and she felt the tactile feedback of the blow.

...This...?

The sensation returning to her hand through her power arm was not that of breaking through.

It was the solid rejection of her sword being deflected.

...What does this mean!?

Fleur reacted as Kagami accelerated and made attack after attack.

She reacted with sword fighting that could only be called flawless.

Her hoe Device was poorly balanced for swinging around, so it was obvious she was holding it close to intercept Kagami's attacks.

The Headmaster took care of dodging and moving and Fleur herself was likely including those imperceptible movements of hers when she moved in to attack, but even with that...

"How can she respond to Kagami's attacks!?"

It would have been difficult for Horinouchi or even a close-range specialist like Hunter to fully respond to Kagami's attacks. It was that level of offensive skill that allowed Kagami to use the old Holy Knight style without difficulty.

“So how can that fairy tale witch manage it!?”

“Horinouchi, is the heat of battle leading you to discriminate?”

“Sh-she uses a flower motif! What else would you call it!?”

Horinouchi could not help it if her voice was picked up by the communications. But she also realized that ether light continued to scatter from Fleur’s flower motif Form.

...What is that?

It was a spell. It was one she had cast on herself. That was simple for the boys and their passive magic, but the girls had to cast it on themselves from outside using a spell that would scatter ether light. So...

“Is that a reinforcement spell!?”

“I expect she is casting a ‘growth’ spell on her Form to strengthen it. Cast it on her Form and it is much easier to make adjustments and exceptions.”

Unsurprisingly, the spell expert from the Spell Division provided an immediate answer.

“Well done, Lady Mary!”

“Kwaaaaaaaaahhh! I was in the Spell Division, but the Head Butler stole the ‘well done’ I wanted to give my underclassman!”

“Head Butler... Please be more considerate.”

“That’s right. I doubt Mary wants to hear that fist from you.”

“Y-you’re all unfairly attacking me, aren’t you!? Aren’t you!?”

Kagami did not panic within the exchange of attacks.

Someone’s strength was meaningless if they did not have the skill to use it. The problem was the way Fleur had a natural sense for those imperceptible movements and that made it easy to overlook her actions.

...That is a skill in its own way.

It was not a combat skill, but it was an effective substitute. That allowed her to fight as a warrior.

But that natural sense had a weakness.

Fleur was using those imperceptible movements in place of an attack spell, but she had never been properly trained in combat.

The lack of variation in her attacks and defenses made that clear enough.

So she used her sense for imperceptibility instead.

But...

...Not good enough!

As they exchanged sword strikes, Kagami struck an attack she had overlooked.

“Do you understand now!?”

It was obvious once she increased the density of attacks. Even if some of her opponent’s movements were imperceptible, that only meant she *could not see* them. It did not mean they *did not exist*.

“If I simply cannot see them, then there is nothing to worry about!”

She could sense her opponent’s movement in the tactile feedback from her own attacks.

If she attacked one way, she knew how her opponent would respond.

And when she raised her weapon one way, she knew what attack her opponent would make.

By figuring out those patterns, she could respond appropriately even without seeing the attacks. Thus...

“———”

She went as far as closing her eyes while making her attack.

She made a barrage of attacks as she stepped straight forward in the sky and reacted to her opponent.

“Ohh...!”

She predicted her opponent’s actions, counterattacked, and pushed forward.

“Here goes!!”

She outdid the girl almost immediately.

“Fleur!”

Cerisier heard a series of sounds that were more like tearing cloth than solid blows.

The attacks were beginning to hit Fleur.

...Kagami Kagami!

She noticed that opponent was not even looking their way. Her eyes were closed, but she could tell what they were doing from the tactile feedback in her sword and she could predict what they would do next.

There had once been someone who could fight like this. No, there still was.

“This is just like Lisbeth...!”

It would be dangerous if the girl had reached that level. And Kagami’s previous battles were more than enough to know this was unlikely to stop there. So...

“Fleur!”

She focused on dodging and tried to put some distance between them.

“Mama!”

But she sensed a note of joy in the voice she received in response. A moment later, she saw her daughter looking back her way even as her Form shattered.

She was smiling.

“Mama! Watch! Watch this!”

Cerisier did as she was told and watched.

“I prepared this spell so I could surprise you!”

“Kagami!”

When she heard Horinouchi’s voice, Kagami opened her eyes and looked.

It was a split-second decision.

...It has changed!

The tactile feedback from the attack on Fleur was different now.

She had resisted Kagami up until this point, but a sudden opening appeared in that resisting strength.

...Is she guiding my attack!?

And when Kagami looked forward, she saw blooming flowers.

Several roses were growing on Fleur's Normal Form like decorations.

"These are just like your flowers, mama!"

She sounded just like someone giving some flowers to a playmate. At the same time, her Form shattered.

"You can have them."

The scattering roses exploded before Kagami's eyes.

Fleur saw it.

Just as the explosive created from her Form hit her opponent, the enemy raised her Device and threw it her way.

...Eh!?

Getting rid of one's Device was the same as giving up on the battle. But...

"Fleur! She can freely create her Device!"

Fleur did not know what that meant at first, but she did notice the danger in her mother's voice.

So she shifted to a focus on dodging. She tried to get her and her mother out of that airspace.

Immediately, her flowers collided with the abandoned sword Device and detonated.

Explosive flames blossomed, but the sword split the explosion and continued

flying.

“Kh...!”

Before she could dodge, the shattering sword flew right toward her. Her mother voiced another warning.

...Don't worry. I understand!

I do understand. I understand everything you're saying, mama. Because I'm a good girl.

But her mother's warning was not what she expected.

“Above you!”

Eh? she thought on reflex. After all, her enemy had been hit by the explosion in front of her.

But there was indeed a figure above her. The Holy Knight was there, raising her arms toward heaven.

As soon as she raised her empty hands toward the moon in the center of the night sky, Fleur saw two things happen.

First, the sword Device broke in two and shattered.

There was no one behind it, but instead...

“...An arrow!?”

It was a shot fired by the shrine maiden.

She had fired straight ahead while using the broken sword as cover.

And the other thing descended from above.

“Let us settle this, Dikaio!”

The Holy Knight held a new Device in her hands.

It almost looked like she had borrowed this power from the moonlight.

“You're stubborn! Don't interrupt my time with mama!”

Kagami flew right toward the enemy.

She saw the look on Fleur's face.

Below the girl's disheveled hair, her eyes were glaring back at Kagami. Kagami also saw the Headmaster protecting her daughter by embracing her from behind.

But Kagami had considerable experience in being stared at, so she looked the girl right back in the eye.

"Sorry, but I will be bringing this all to an end!"

"You can't! I won't let you! Because..."

Fleur raised the hoe Device to counterattack.

Kagami deflected it outwards and let Horinouchi's arrow pass below her arm. But...

"Kagami!"

She knew why Horinouchi called her name from behind: Fleur was bait. She had only pretended to raise her hoe Device to attack.

"The Headmaster's attack is coming!"

Horinouchi was exactly right. A spear of coiled roses was launched straight toward Kagami.

She used her right arm.

The Headmaster spun around with Fleur as she launched the rose spear attack. That quick attack was meant to crush Horinouchi's arrow and Kagami did not hesitate to strike at it with Dikaio syne.

She thrust the sword forward.

She opened her sword in cannon mode.

"I will be using that!"

And she fired a blast at the spear tip.

Horinouchi saw the rose spear instantly become an explosive fuse.

At the very last second before the spear detonated, Kagami's shell struck its

very core.

The rest was simple.

Control of the undetonated bomb spear fell to the one who detonated it.

Kagami's shell was likely annihilated by the very explosions it induced, but a chain-reaction of explosions shot down the rose spear from Kagami's end to the Headmaster's end.

Dikaiosyne's tip was shattered at the same speed as its shell had flown, and explosions of light raced down the spear toward Cerisier and Fleur.

...It's going to reach them!

As soon as Horinouchi thought that, she saw something.

It was Fleur. She accelerated the rotation of her body while seeming to embrace the Headmaster.

She had been bait, but now she quickly spun the hoe Device and the Headmaster with it.

"She's going to cut it!?"

The dancing spin sent the hoe's blade accurately into the center of the rose spear.

The spear was sliced in two and the induced explosions did not reach the Headmaster. And as the hoe continued swinging around, Fleur's flowers bloomed whitely along its path.

The racing arc of white was going to reach Kagami as she held Dikaiosyne forward.

...Does that mean...?

It had been a double trap. No, Horinouchi doubted either of them had planned it this way.

Those two could work together while far closer together than Horinouchi and Kagami could.

And as soon as the Headmaster threw away the remnants of the spear in her hand, the arc drawn by Fleur and the spear's remnants released an explosive

blast.

The brightness-enhanced footage from the F-23s showed Hunter the explosion between the two sides.

Even with the high-level surveillance skills of the pilots from Atsugi, following all the detailed movements of the witch battle was not easy. Currently, footage from 3 fighters was being combined and unified to create the video Hunter watched.

Even with a direct feed from the 7th Fleet's processing system, there was a slight lag.

...Dammit. I can't really complain, but I really want to!

As soon as she thought that, two people burst from the explosive blast.

One was Kagami. She had likely used the half-destroyed Dikaiosyne as a shield against the shockwave. Horinouchi flew out behind her. She had been slowed by a fair bit, but the two of them still ascended.

"Above!?"

That was exactly right.

The two of them were flying high in the west where the Headmaster and Fleur flew as a single silhouette.

Their destination was displayed on the spell circle's bird's-eye-view map. When Hunter read the text there, she could feel her mouth spreading horizontally.

"Oh, c'mon. Be careful, you two! You've arrived on the battlefield!"

Horinouchi realized something as she pursued the enemy with Kagami.

At some point, the clouds and fog below them had disappeared.

"It would seem we have arrived, Horinouchi."

They had left the lake region that had produced the fog. Which meant...

"This is the battlefield they prepared, isn't it!?"

From here on, they could summon their Magino Devices. With that in mind, she looked over to see the Headmaster and Fleur turning back their way.

They were going to do it. They were going to summon their Magino Frame as the Rank 1.

But one thing bothered Horinouchi.

“Why are they moving so high!?”

Fleur’s Magino Device created a forest on the ground and towered up from there. They had assumed it positioned itself on the ground to create the environment around it. However...

“Is there some other way of using it!?”

Fleur spoke as she watched the two ether lights approaching them from a lower altitude.

“Let’s go, mama! Let’s end it with this battle!”

“Yes,” replied her mother who embraced her from behind. This was a jinx and her mother always did this when she was doing something important.

...Right.

She nodded in her heart and she had permission outside her heart, so she did it.

“Summon Magino Frame!”

Horinouchi summoned her own Magino Frame while checking on the terrain with a spell circle.

This was the north end of Ibaraki where the western border with Tochigi and the northern border with Fukushima came together. The Nasu Highlands were to the west and a 50 kilometer downward slope and plain continued to the east, but...

...During the previous Hexennacht, the damage continuing north from Tokyo Bay was concentrated here.

Since it was on the border between prefectures, there had been conflict over which prefecture would lead the recovery work, so Shihouin Academy had apparently settled the arguments by having it restored to its natural environment. The scars of the destructive power would be allowed to fade with time and the focus would be on restoring it as a grassy plain.

But for the moment, it was a battlefield.

Fleur did not have to worry about using her Magino Device's full power in this deserted environment.

"Kagami, let's finish this according to plan!"

"Horinouchi, it does not look like they will let us!"

Eh? thought Horinouchi as she looked up into the sky along with the Suzaku that had appeared to construct the Magino Device.

Ether light was gathering in the night sky to construct Fleur's Magino Device.

There were a few strange things about it.

Its size was expanding and the summoning of its supporting parts did not stop.

...Huh!?

Something was not right about how the Magino Device was created in a series of moments. It was being created far faster than her own. That was due to its simple design and the Headmaster's assistance, but...

"What is with that height!?"

It was far different from when she had seen it the evening before. Just the hoe blade and its base were more than 2 kilometers tall.

...That's more than 4 times before!

And that was not all.

Ether light suddenly sprayed through the sky.

It came from Fleur's gigantic Magino Device.

But the light did not produce a flowery fog. It flowed out like a roaring waterfall on either side and then something was created to the left and right of

the hoe Device.

It was a tall frame with a firing system gathered at the top. It had a hoe-like shape accented by the three leaves brought together at the top.

“It’s copying itself!?”

It all continued.

At her speed, Horinouchi should only have been able to hear the roaring wind, but she did hear something else.

She heard the ley line vibrations as those gigantic objects were instantly constructed from the ether.

There were 5 copies. Fleur’s Magino Device had summoned those copies on either side of itself to form a circle around it.

...Is this...?

Kagami understood what had happened. But...

...Can they do that using this world’s system!?

The Magino Device had instantly copied itself and combined with the copies.

“Kagami! Horinouchi!”

Hunter’s voice arrived with some video footage.

The live footage was from a surveillance satellite overhead and it showed exactly what had been created.

Above the black color of the highlands at night, 6 different hoe Devices had attached their back ends together into a giant circle around the central one. It was...

...A flower!?

Seen from above, the completed form was a giant flower with the six hoes arranged in a circle.

“It’s 3 kilometers across! This is the largest Device in our records!”

As Hunter said that, light appeared.

The giant flower was like a floating fortress and it began emitting streams of flowers

Chapter 13: Blooming of the Flower of Illusion and Rejection



Is what you love

In front of you now?

The attack was sudden.

Fleur's Magino Device had taken on a floral shape. That fortress composed of 6 Devices slowly rotated while scattering flowers into the space around it.

They were not just released horizontally; it was a complete field of air currents, so they hovered, rocked, rose, and fell.

As the giant flower continued to spin, countless flower petals flew from what had originally been the hoe blades. Those large components had cannon openings on the top and bottom and explosive flowers spilled from there like clouds of pollen.

The only sound was the roaring of the wind.

But something else happened once 2 Magino Devices approached it while avoiding the air currents.

Spell circles opened on the flower's upper surface.

6 of them opened in a horizontal flower shape and they bore the word "fire".

As soon as all 6 glowed, a single attack was formed.

At the center of the 6 spell circles, glowing flowers appeared higher up in the air and flew from north to south. The cannon blast of glowing flowers raced in a straight line toward the part of the sky the other 2 Devices occupied.

The beam of light shot through and swept across the night.

The 2 Devices swiftly descended and dodged the path of the light.

But the flying light still brought destruction.

At a range of 270 km and after passing over the 7th Fleet on the Pacific, the beam drew a great arc and the ocean exploded along a straight line.

Hunter saw a long, long north-to-south stretch of light along the eastern ocean.

It happened behind them while they faced the battlefield on the mainland, but...

"That wasn't a physical shell or a created shell! I didn't know a beam attack could fly that far!"

Based on the power of the hit, it could have gone even further. Its actual range may have been more than 500 km.

That was far shorter than the range of Hunter's Hedgehog, but...

“There’s nothing you can do if she fires that from the absolute defense of her environment...”

C’mon now.

“When did this turn into something from a kaiju battle?”

“And does this mean mankind couldn’t defeat the Black Witch last Hexennacht even with something like that?”

“The Headmaster might not have had this. This is the powered up version, remember?”

But then the Head Butler called in from the Horinouchi family.

“There are records of a similar attack being used back then. ...But since Lady Mitsuru’s mother was even more powerful than Lady Shihouin or Lady Lisbeth, she must have had something even greater.”

That fact was what mattered here.

What could defeat something rivalling this?

...Is what we discussed last night really going to work?

Hunter wondered what she would do if it was her, but she had to focus on the present situation.

“I doubt I’ll get an answer, but what kind of power could defeat this?”

There were of course no records of that. They had been erased by the Black Witch.

So Horinouchi and Kagami would have to figure something out. They would have to add to the previous night’s strategizing and defeat this fortress.

...If only we still had those records.

Just as Hunter thought that, the Head Butler sent another transmission.

“The combat records for Lady Mitsuru’s mother do not remain, but we do know the name of what she did then.”

“And what is-...?”

Just as she tried to ask, a bright explosion cloud appeared in the sky.

...Has it started to build up its environment!?

She saw a vast flower garden and cherry trees in the night sky. They were in full bloom.

Horinouchi and Akerindou were enveloped by the giant swirling blizzard of flowers.

...A typhoon!?

The giant pink flower was sitting in the center and ether flowers were spreading in every direction – both horizontally and vertically – from there.

It all created a vortex with a vast rotation and trailing flowers that ignored the wind. Those flowers even arrived behind Horinouchi.

Information from the US military was reaching her via the Horinouchi family. The process by which Fleur's Magino Device was constructed was displayed next to her face.

It was a single giant Device.

The engine system was focused at the center of the top and the bottom only contained the ether extraction system.

It looked like it specialized in defense and attack. The fundamental design philosophy was probably the same as European U.A.H.'s Magino Devices. But...

"What is with this expansion of the cannon portion!?"

She barely saw any of the thruster-related structures that it would need to move. Did it have a buoyancy system installed across various points and did it move by altering their balance? But in addition to that, the cannon's shell creation system was far too large.

The entire base of the hoe's three leaves formed the shell creation system.

The rest was only the skinny handle, so essentially 80% of the Magino Device was used to create the explosive flowers.

The design was far simpler than she had thought, but when it was this extreme, it completely restricted what tactics were available.

“Can you really focus this much on attack!?”

“Huh? I feel like I was shot down by a Device with that exact philosophy recently.”

“What a coincidence. I too had a Device with that philosophy shoot me all the way from the South Pole.”

“I-if you have something to say, come out and say it!”

“Ha ha ha. They know you will understand even if they do not. It is a sign of trust, Horinouchi.”

Honestly, sulked Horinouchi as she checked on Akerindou’s summoning.

She decided to accelerate upwards and go for the first attack.

Next to her, Kagami had finished the summoning of Dikaiosyne, so...

“Here we go!”

“Roostaaaaaaaahhhhhh!”

The Suzaku shouted from her shoulder, but she decided to assume it was only saying “rooster” and ignored it. It may have been at the age where it wanted a hen, but she decided not to think about the possibility of it being female.

She simply flew onward.

Just as they had discussed, she used multi-stage armored shells. She had to get close before firing them and Fleur’s Magino Device still had to fully disseminate its flowers and establish its environment.

This was her chance.

“Akerindou, let’s go at full speed!”

Kagami casually waved from Dikaiosyne next to her. She was a little further ahead.

This was how it always went. This was a Ranker Battle and not a time to just watch the enemy. So...

“Here goes!”

She split through the wind while having Akerindou fold up and down into its acceleration form.

She continued on.

She eventually broke through the blowing wind and only heard the sound of herself tearing through the atmosphere. White water vapor trailed back from Akerindou’s leading points and corners.

...Hurry...!

Hunter and Mary had taught them that making a quick attack was crucial against this opponent. And...

...We have to stop the Headmaster and Fleur!

With that thought, the distance between the two sides dropped below 5 kilometers.

Their opponent was gigantic. Horinouchi had no idea how it worked, but she knew this would make it easy to target.

However, the flower at the center of it all suddenly tilted. Six spell circles opened on the top.

“Horinouchi! You’re moving too far ahead!”

Just as Kagami sent her a warning, a beam of glowing rose flowers swept across their airspace.

Mary watched the footage as Horinouchi and Kagami dodged in a very forceful fashion.

The video was only static after the wide-range vortex of flowers hit it, but she could still detect the 2 Magino Devices by setting the proper band of ether detection.

Kagami proactively dodged the beam of light released into the sky.

...She fired her cannon!

Mary recognized this because Kagami had dodged her attacks like this inside the barrier she had created at the North Pole.

Kagami used the recoil to spin around backwards. And Horinouchi's Akerindou was along that spinning path. So the rest was simple.

"She collides with her."

Sure enough, a collision hit Akerindou diagonally.

Dikaiosyne knocked itself down in order to push Akerindou away.

It hit.

An intense sound shook the scene, but the footage showed the 2 Magino Devices had indeed fallen below the sweeping beam of light.

It did not hit.

However, the movement of the beam created a shockwave.

"Miss Horinouchi...!"

Mary decided not to use the girl's true name as she watched the 2 Magino Device's tumbling through the air.

The shockwave created by the sweeping light had struck them as a wide surface.

It was a powerful enough hit for the 500-meter Devices to lose control.

The blue and vermillion Devices were thrown several kilometers and flipped 5 times before righting themselves.

After regaining control, they found themselves in a certain position.

The giant flower was turned such that the oldest of Fleur's Magino Devices was facing Kagami and Horinouchi.

Horinouchi was aware her pulse was racing.

...Was that its main cannon!?

She had sensed some panic when up against Hunter and Mary or in her other Ranker Battles.

But she felt something else against this opponent.

That panic never left her.

It felt like everything was dangerous and that a single mistake would lead to absolute defeat. Also...

...Are our attacks even getting through?

Just as she wondered that, Kagami rested her control Device on her shoulder and spoke atop Dikaiosyne.

“I see.” Her tone did not allow anyone to contradict her. “So you can take it this far if you are willing to use any means necessary.”

Was that a bad thing or not?

It was not wrong from the perspective of defeating the Black Witch. Criticizing the use of so much power was only the jealousy of the weak.

...Then why?

Once she wondered that, she belatedly recalled where Kagami came from.

She was one of this world’s creators. The world was a story and a setting, but there had likely been some kind of ideal built into it.

In that case...

...Yes.

Kagami must have been angry. Angry at herself.

After all, she had created this world and she had made one of its residents take things this far.

If she had stopped her sister, the Black Witch, sooner, this kind of power never would have been created.

But this much power had been created, and...

“———”

A few things seemed to link together inside Horinouchi.

So she had something to say, even if her origin was different from Kagami’s.

“Kagami.”

“Do you need something?”

“Yes, I am panicking and cautious. I am wondering what in the world is going on.”

But...

“I am not afraid of the person I must face.”

She spoke without taking her eyes off of their opponent and she did not receive an immediate response. But after the span of a few breaths, her partner spoke clearly.

“Thank you.”

But she also heard another voice.

A witch was laughing from the great flower at the center of the moonlit vortex of flowers.

“Ha ha.”

The flower witch raised her hands toward the night sky.

“That should be enough, right? No.”

Here it comes, thought Horinouchi just as it and an announcement arrived.

“Bloom.”

The blowing flowers began a chain reaction detonation.

...Wow, that's really cruel...!

A mass of light appeared in the western sky.

It was far from small. Even from the distant ocean, the air and sky covering multiple regions of eastern Japan emitted the light of ether explosions.

There was more than one light. Countless chain reactions rotated around, raced out, and burst to form water vapor explosions, clouds, and a rotating air current that turned it all into a great vortex.

It was a giant explosive typhoon. The air struck by the blasts was electrified and lightning began to race vertically and horizontally through it. Also...

“Hunter! Can you see the expansion by eye!?”

“I can, I can! It’s really spreading!”

She stood on an aircraft carrier flight deck. She used the edge of the deck to measure by and could tell the explosive cloud was spreading along the mainland.

It was spreading surprisingly quickly. She had seen the calculations the night before, but seeing it for real was entirely different.

...There was a movie with a scene like this, wasn’t there?

She had a feeling there were a lot of movies that did. It could be sharks, gators, snakes, cows, or anything really. This time it was flowers.

“Would you call this a Flowernado?”

“A Fleurnado! It would be a Fleurnado, Hunter!”

Where is the captain from anyway? But then she heard a voice over the staticky transmission.

“Heyyy, you alive?”

“———”

There was no response. Only static. So...

“Mankoooo.”

“I-I’m trying to dodge!!”

That exchange could not have been less surprising.

Fleur shook both hands and practically slapped the keyboard to instruct the flowers to bloom.

They did so. The front line of blooming flowers could rise, fall, or ride the rotation around as she saw fit.

Explosions danced through the sky and scattering light blew in the wind.

The wind, the air, and everything that bloomed and scattered was her power.

“Magino Device Zephyr! Let’s see how far those flowers can bloom!”

The environment had already spread its power over a 50 kilometer region.

The flowers were everywhere and they shined in the moonlight.

Everyone feared the moonlight, but she did not.

She thought it was pretty.

After all, the flowers that mama and I made glow at night.

“This light is proof that mama is by my side!”

The flower light was everywhere now. It surrounded the heavens and earth and held the moon overhead as if to bless them in the center.

Even that moonlight will eventually be ours.

And then this will all be over. I’ll never again have to worry about losing mama.

The end is within reach.

The chain reaction of overlapping explosions is shaking my laughter. The vibration in the bottom of my lungs becomes a sound of joy in my throat.

“Ha ha...”

With each laugh, a portion of the sky detonated.

Even the air burst with that floral scent.

She could only produce laughter.

“Hey.” She turned back toward her mother and spread her arms to indicate everything. “We finally, finally have this many flowers blooming, mama! Isn’t it amazing!? It’s just like the flowers you had bloom 10 years ago! Let’s make it even better together! If we do, then you won’t lose again, right!? You won’t go away, right!?”

Yes, that was what she wanted. But...

“You fool...!”

They had so much freedom and power, but there were two things that opposed them: the 2 Magino Devices that had been swept through the current of explosions but escaped.

The girl standing on the sword Device raised her voice.

“There is something you have lost even if you wield that power! So why are you growing drunk on that power!?”

Fleur had no idea what this girl was saying.

...I mean, mama and I are doing so well together.

Why is she telling us to stop?

“Ha ha.”

If we stop, we can't win at Hexennacht.

If you can stop us, then you might be able to win at Hexennacht. But...

“Then what are you going to do about it?”

She decided to ask.

“If you two at Rank 2 can stand up to mama and me at Rank 1, then how are you going to do it!?”

“We will stop you!”

Horinouchi heard Kagami yelling to Fleur.

“You must not use your mother's life to grow drunk on power!”

“Yes,” agreed Horinouchi. “We will stop that power.”

She then reached a hand out toward Kagami.

She did not look toward the other girl. And with the space between their Magino Devices, there was no way her hand could reach.

But, as if calling out to Kagami, she spread her right hand and held it out as if to hold hands.

There was a great gap between them, but when she glanced to the right...

...I knew it.

Kagami had raised her left hand in the same way. But hers was reaching out as if to reach Horinouchi.

...Is that how she does it?

She smiled a little, but that was only due to how amusing that slight difference was. Probably. She then clenched her raised hand.

“Let’s do this.”

“Yes.”

With that, she launched Akerindou forward.

She began a charge.

Chapter 14: What is Important

第十四章

『大事なことは』



嘘ではないと
教えよう
数を数えるように
散る前に

I will show you

That it is not a lie

Before I scatter

Like counting numbers

Their approach did not use a simple course.

Kagami had instructed Horinouchi to not fight the air current but to use high-speed mobility.

...That is contradictory!

Horinouchi felt it was like being told to slowly hurry, but there was a reason to do that.

“If she is using her senses to manage this airspace, then the visible flowers and invisible air are all moving according to her will.”

Meaning...

“If we take any noticeable actions, the flowers will sense it, approach, and surround us. They are just like leaves fallen into a stream. If we are a rocky area, they will unexpectedly approach and surround us.”

That reminded Horinouchi of something.

“When Aunt Lisbeth fought Fleur yesterday evening, the flower ash circled behind her spatial cut, didn’t it?”

“Right. Her flowers are not simply blowing in the wind. The environment gives them motion as ‘wind’.”

Then what were they to do?

“We will be able to see the environmental current if we pursue the flowers with our own current. The flowers cannot approach or surround something riding the same current. And if we are riding that current, we only have to let it lightly carry us onward. ...Can you discern our path?”

She could.

She sent their visual information and the data from their Devices' senses to the Horinouchi family. By the time she had made a half rotation along with Kagami, a program containing course information had been sent to her spell circle.

...We can do this!

The air current swept everything upwards. Riding that would take them even higher than Fleur's combined Device, but that only meant they had to charge at her from above.

"The only other thing to worry about is..."

"That sweeping attack of course, but also the flowers that Fleur automatically sends at us plus the blasts and shockwaves of the detonations that occur within the air currents."

"That's a lot to watch out for."

She was calm enough to make wry comments.

This was their opponent's environment, but they were still putting together a counterattack plan.

Horinouchi rode the air current, accelerated to surpass it, and clapped her hands.

"Kagami, I'm going to send you some power!"

Mary heard a familiar sound from the spell circle displaying the battlefield.

It was a high-pitched sound mixed in with the repeated explosions and impacts that were reminiscent of a thunderstorm.

"A shrine bell..."

Those bells were rung when praying at a Shinto shrine. And if they were sounding...

"Has Miss Horinouchi started using a barrier spell!?"

Fleur realized her opponents were not being incorporated into her

environment.

...That bell!

The flowers should have been growing on their Magino Devices by now, but they were not and the ringing of a bell shook the air instead.

“That is a barrier, Fleur. She is using a Shinto purification spell.”

“No fair, mama! I worked so hard on this!”

The enemy also began using their secondary cannons while circling rapidly through the spiraling flowers. They were not attacking her. They were piercing the surrounding flowers and air currents to intentionally trigger detonations.

Of course, Fleur’s flower air currents were constantly being created, but by reading the path near them and triggering explosions in advance, they could create safe areas. So Fleur actively sent flowers in to limit the enemies’ locations. And...

“Open the petals!”

The petals on the bottom of the giant 3 km flower also opened.

It was not quite double, but the expansion of flowers was further pressurized. If the enemy was going to ignore her environment...

“Can you survive if I blow up everything except for mama and me!?”

She spread her arms and then lifted them up.

The environment was already being constructed. So...

“Bring the front line of flowers to full bloom and lift them up!”

...Is she detonating the entire area!?

Kagami saw the area below fill with the color of explosions.

She knew what Fleur had begun.

After confirming that the environment was replete with flowers, she had prepared enough to fill in the gaps and...

“She is detonating everything horizontally from bottom to top!”

There were already a great many flowers scattered in the air, so there would be no dodging this. Kagami and Horinouchi's equipment was touching and riding them.

By starting a horizontal detonation from below, Fleur could leave the rest to a chain reaction that quickly filled the entire environment with explosions all the way to the top.

The best way to avoid it would be to escape the environment.

But carelessly moving outside the current would trigger explosions around them before the larger scale one arrived from below. The two of them were already riding the environment's current to approach their enemy.

The only possible shelter was...

"Right next to the enemy! Kagami!"

The chain reaction would be set to not damage Fleur herself. So...

"So we must read the route through the environment and charge on in!"

As soon as Kagami raised her voice, it arrived.

A sweeping attack flew their way from the 6 spell circles on the top of the giant flower.

Fleur saw the emitted beam of light pass directly above the two Magino Devices.

She had meant to hit them, but they had started descending.

...They're coming, aren't they!?

They had been circling somewhat upwards as they rode the current, but now they were forcibly accelerating down toward her.

They were matching their course to the environment while also making their way inwards.

They had said they would stop her, so they were on their way to do so.

If they had been all talk, they would have been swept away. But if they were

charging toward her...

“Stop meddling!”

As soon as she yelled up at them, a shockwave ran through the entire space the beam had passed through.

Lightning scattered, the air could be heard splitting apart, and the two Magino Devices were struck from above.

The blue and vermilion sword and bow shook violently, but Fleur did not stop there.

She pointed down with both hands and drew a connecting circle.

“Garland.”

With that, a ring of new explosives blossomed around the giant flower Device.

It would provide a counterattack from below as the enemy was knocked down by the shockwave from above.

Once that knocked them off balance, the all-encompassing horizontal explosions would rise up and destroy them!

Then the ring of explosives reached the vermilion and blue Devices.

“It hit!”

“Horinouchi!”

Kagami decided the biggest threat was letting the explosives hit the center of their Devices from below.

In this situation, they could withstand the weight and impact of the shockwave bearing down on them from above, but that would cause the front and back to lower. An upwards hit on the center could easily break the Device in half.

They needed to ascend at full power. Then the counterattack explosions would not hit them from below and they could reduce the damage from the following all-encompassing blast by putting more distance between them and it. So...

“Ascend at full speed!”

Dikaiosyne and Akerindou were both tail heavy, so the back was lowering and the front was rising as the garland of explosives blossomed.

...We avoided a direct hit!

Immediately, the garland blast arrived from below.

“...”

The 500-meter Magino Devices’ front ends hopped up like they had been hit by an uppercut. And...

...Here it comes!

The rising vertical detonation approached from directly below.

The bottom of her vision grew white.

“—————”

The wind caused by the explosive blast grabbed at them and enveloped them.

Fleur saw the cascade of light rise before her eyes.

It covered everything she could see in every direction. The explosion of light seemed to have had the shape of her flower cut out of it as it blew upwards from below.

It was beautiful. It had gone well.

“Mama! Wasn’t that amazing!?”

The explosive cascade covered everything within 50 kilometers.

She had never seen anything like this either, but she still bragged about it.

“And this isn’t all.”

That was right. A new current of flowers was already fluttering up from below.

And the sky came into view. The wall of explosions rose toward the heavens, reached its peak, and vanished.

There was the sky. As the flowers on the outer edge whirled around, the final explosions reverberated as a great noise.

They echoed through the air.

“Ha ha.”

A laugh escaped. She was glad. After all...

“We won, mama.”

Nothing remained. The power she had made with her mama had kept her at Rank 1. This had ended it.

She was not afraid of Hexennacht. And yet...

“Mama.”

Why?

“Why aren’t you smiling, mama?”

A rumbling raced through the northern sky. Mary listened to it from the Spell Division building’s rooftop and saw a distant pillar of light rising toward the heavens.

...What is that?

She recalled a similar spell being used in her world.

But it had been used to destroy the minions of the “god” along with the city they occupied and it had taken several thousand spell users to cast. Even if this world was richer and had further developed its spell-related techniques, it was unbelievable that an individual could pull off something like that.

“Incredible...”

How would I fight something like that? she wondered as she saw some movement.

“Is that...?”

It was Lisbeth. She was walking down an academy path. She was headed through the courtyard for the mausoleum.

Footsteps sounded at the bottom of the night.

Lisbeth hurried along the cold floor of a quiet underground corridor.

She was so intent on taking the shortest route that her shoulder bumped into the inside wall at a curve.

“Kh...”

She groaned in her haste, but she did not care.

The spell circle next to her face was receiving updates on the Ranker Battle from U.A.H. witches.

Her pace quickly took her to the end of the corridor.

She ignored the “keep out” sign and held up her card key.

“So you only have to hold it up to the reader...”

That part alone she handled calmly and then she stepped in through the opened door.

I would really prefer not to visit this place over and over, thought Lisbeth.

The hall she had visited the night before was simply dark. The light of the glowing plants had almost entirely vanished, so she had to rely on the lights illuminating the central coffin and other important points.

The flower dragon near the coffin approached when it saw her. It likely wanted to know why things had gone so dark.

...Is Cerisier approaching her end?

She had tricked herself into thinking the woman was alive because they would occasionally contact and converse with each other. Since that woman would sometimes talk about Mitsuyo, it had felt like reminiscing between two survivors.

But that was inaccurate.

She had been meeting and speaking with regrets that had yet to fall asleep.

Once those were gone, none of it would remain anywhere.

“Mitsuyo knew.”

She had been strict but kind.

“She knew her soul would fill this world and protect so very much.”

This world. Some ancient witches had proposed the theory that the ether-based ley lines were a torrent of “power” that included the souls of the people, of nature, and even of the stars.

Shinto included the idea that the dead would protect the local people as earthly spirits.

Looking at it that way, it was obvious why Mitsuyo had sealed away her regrets and left. She had known she would protect the next generation and she had guided her heir without mistaking that girl’s nature.

But what about the others?

When Lisbeth had discovered Cerisier’s regret playing with her daughter at the Shihouin mansion like nothing had happened, she had been hesitant, but she had accepted it.

She should have scolded the woman. She should have told her to accept her slumber and to let her soul disappear.

Why had she not done so?

“Cerisier...”

Lisbeth kneeled next to the coffin.

“You can hear me, can’t you!? What are we doing!?”

She remembered what Cerisier’s regret had said when they had been reunited.

“There’s still more I have to do to protect my daughter and this world.”

To help her with the “and this world” part, they had built Shihouin Academy and decided to protect and raise the next generation of witches there.

But what about her daughter?

“Are you really ‘protecting’ Fleur right now? ...Your daughter is continuing to wield that power because she doesn’t want to leave you and because she wants you to praise her!”

Fleur might lose her mother at some point. So to rid her daughter of that fear, Cerisier had told her daughter something.

...*“If you’re a good girl, we can be together forever.”*

Cerisier had to understand the truth.

She had to understand what it truly meant to “be together”.

“Mitsuyo understood that.”

Even if your mother had left you and was gone, you would sometimes notice something.

You would find in yourself the power, skills, and ways of thinking that you had inherited from your mother.

That was part of a parent’s “divine protection”.

That meaning seemed to have gotten through to Mitsuyo’s daughter, Mitsuru. Her knowledge of Shinto would help there, but last night she had lacked her previous grudge over losing her mother.

She had learned to smile even at the small things.

Was that due to her interaction with the Kagami girl who claimed to have come from another world? Or had she gained that through the previous Ranker Battles?

Lisbeth did not know.

But children would grow even without their parents. On the other hand, what they had been taught would never go away. And yet...

“Your child doesn’t realize that she is *alone* right now!”

She yelled down at the coffin.

“Is that really the child you wanted!?”

“Mama?”

Fleur saw her mother lightly bite her lip.

...*What is it?*

“Are you in pain? Did something upset you? Tell me, mama. It doesn’t matter if something bad happened. I mean, we can do all this when we work together.

And..."

And...

"If I'm doing something wrong, I'll be even more of a good girl. I'll always, always do everything you tell me to. So..."

She trailed off there.

Suddenly, the Magino Device below her feet shook vertically. And...

"Eh...?"

The shaking continued a 2nd, 3rd, and 4th time. Countless warning spell circles appeared atop the Device and around her.

Most of them appeared along the edge of one of the Devices forming the great flower.

And as those red warnings appeared, something happened to the hoe surrounded by them.

"...What!?"

With a metallic shattering sound, sparks, and ether light fragments, the hoe-shaped Device hopped straight upwards.

It had been struck. A collision of pure power had knocked a portion of the flower out of place. And...

...A cannon blast!?

It was fired straight up from below. The hoe blade's three leaves were pierced and deflected by the blast of light.

When the Device was broken by the ether light, the shockwave and power reinforcement divine protections caused it to scatter from above. The Giant Device came apart with a sound like dozens of glass panes shattering, and Fleur saw her enemy.

A blue sword and a vermilion bow appeared alongside her.

...They did it!

Hunter saw two Magino Devices beyond the newly-created explosive air currents.

They were below the giant shattering flower. They were lined up in a vertical orientation to hide below the petals.

She did not even need to ask when they had done that.

“When they were knocked down before, the counterattack from below turned their front end skyward.”

“They used the recoil?” asked the Head Butler over a spell circle.

She nodded.

“Instead of resisting the upwards force of the counterattack, they let their Devices point upwards and then fired their main cannons. If they don’t reduce the recoil, that provides a short dash backwards. ...And that must have brought them just below the giant Device.”

Below the flower was a safe zone, so they had fled there.

Hunter was impressed they had survived, but both Devices already had several pillars of ether smoke rising from them.

If they had not repaired the Devices even with Kagami there, they must not have had any time to spare. But...

“Don’t waste this chance!”

Horinouchi had fired.

She had used a multi-stage armored shell. She had done exactly what they had planned at their meeting.

...That destroyed one of them at least!

That said, there was another problem they had to face. Akerindou and Dikaiosyne were currently positioned almost entirely vertically. In both cases, the entire Device acted as the barrel, so they would have to tilt the Device to aim left or right unless they were using guided shells.

But even right next to Fleur’s 2-kilometer-tall Device, the pocket created by

the destroyed piece was narrow.

She considered using a guided shell, but it would be meaningless if she could not destroy the target. Besides, if the shell ricocheted up into the sky, it would give Fleur and the Headmaster quite a shock.

“Heh heh. That might not be a bad idea.”

“Head Butler! Lady Mitsuru just laughed fearlessly!”

“Is this what you call having enough confidence to scoff even at the Headmaster’s daughter!?”

“No Device can survive a close-range hit from Lady Mitsuru’s cannon!”

“Are you maids inventing aspects of Lady Mitsuru’s personality and reputation now!?”

Fleur used a spell circle to check on the damage to her Devices.

She had lost 1 of the 6 and her opponents were hiding in the pocket created by the damage. It was true Zephyr could not send the environment flowers to that location. To avoid self-destruction, the flowers were set to not reach any space that was supposed to be inside it.

Her opponents must have understood that. The sound of cannon fire echoed within Zephyr’s walls.

They had apparently taken aim at the Device on the right side of the opened pocket. After a sound of impact, the pocket-side leaf of its 3 was destroyed.

...They’re so mean!

“Why are they trying to stop us? They don’t stand a chance against us!”

To protest, Fleur started up the device control spell circle and removed the lock. Then she moved the secondary cannons that stuck up from the Devices like towers. They were 200 meters tall. The total of 5 secondary cannons could open the muzzles on their surface and fire 64 beams of light each.

They were meant for close-range combat and for Devices that stuck to hers like

these were doing.

After releasing them in order starting from the top, she used the Device's sight devices to view the two Devices in the pocket.

...Oh. They're actually pretty damaged.

Then there was nothing to worry about. Those two could not stop her and her mama.

But she would not let this Device be plucked by anyone other than her and her mama. So...

"I'll beat them down!"

The secondary cannons pointed in the correct direction launched a total of 152 guided beams toward the targets.

Horinouchi did not hesitate.

She fired three 3-arrow defense shells toward the massive downpour of light raining on them from above.

"I'm counting on you!"

She used the recoil of the shots to circle below Dikaiosyne like it was an umbrella.

Immediately afterwards, the 3-arrow expansions were pierced through with an explosive sound far above.

The remnants of the 3-arrows and the beams of light slammed into the Magino Device acting as an umbrella.

Sound sprayed out, tremors raced out, and Horinouchi could feel the hits to Dikaiosyne even as far away as she was. Dikaiosyne took a total of 82 hits. 70% of the upper armor was stripped away, 37% of the primary frame was damaged, and the aftereffects were still hitting it.

But below that rumbling, the Suzaku cried out.

"Chiiiiiiivalryyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"

What was that? Chivalry? she wondered, but Kagami was not here to provide a tsukkomi.

Of course she was not. After all...

“Go, Kagami!”

She had already told her she was counting on her.

“Get her!!”

Her appearance and action were instantaneous.

Fleur had just set the secondary cannons to their automatic barrage setting when someone appeared right before her.

...Eh?

A blue and white figure stood on the Device.

It was a Holy Knight. She held a large sword and was running toward Fleur.

“Why...!?”

My and mama’s Device are going to win. And that’s how I can make mama happy. It’s how I can be a good girl.

So why?

“Why are you interfering!?”

The flower witch fell back.

She took a step back while raising her hoe Device, but it was too late.

And so she swung her body like usual. With that movement, anyone would lose sight of her and be unable to keep up. So...

“Ha ha.”

Aware she had entered a safe zone, laughter escaped her lips.

When her opponent charged in, unable to see her, she would circle around behind the girl. And then she only had to get an attack in with her hoe and hit

her with the flowers.

That had been a close one, but...

...Mama, I did it!

Her mama would be coming to help her too, but she could handle this much on her own.

“Mama.”

Her mama was always doing something with her: fighting, creating her Device, or growing the flowers. They were always together. They were together everywhere.

Only a bad girl would just let her mama help her out.

A good girl would listen to what her mama said and do her part. She was a good girl who did not cause her mama any trouble. So just like her mama, she could do something together with her. Thus...

“I’m not a bad girl, mama.”

With that, she circled around. She circled behind the Holy Knight to get in her attack.

Except she could not.

...Eh?

Her opponent was not in front of her. The girl was not where she should have been. Almost like...

“My-...”

“People are not fallen leaves, Fleur. Once we see it a few times and focus on it, we can copy even the most complex and intricate movements.”

A shiver ran down Fleur’s spine when she heard that voice behind her.

...It can’t be...

“I was a bit of a late bloomer for a cherry blossom. But it is autumn, so no one will complain if the flowers have withered.”

When she looked back, she saw the Holy Knight approaching to swing an

attack down from above.

...Impossible!

She could think of no other word, but a different word escaped her mouth.

“Mama...!”

“Cerisier...!”

Lisbeth shouted in the underground hall.

The last remaining glowing plants lost their light as falling flower petals.

“Hey...!”

The witch from Europe placed her hands on the coffin and raised her voice.

“Is this the end...!?”

Kagami stopped moving.

She had come here intending to hit the girl. But...

...Horinouchi was right.

She had said she would handle anything that Kagami was hesitant about. But...

“————”

It was not Fleur standing before her.

It was the dress-wearing Headmaster.

She had faded enough to see the night and the cloud of flowers through her.

The Dikaiosyne that Kagami held was stopped at the woman’s left shoulder.

It had not hit her. Kagami had stopped it there.

When she remembered the coffin and glowing plants she had seen underground the night before, she had been unable to go through with the attack.

As she faced the woman who had shoved her daughter aside and spread her

arms, she breathed in and spoke.

“Well done.”

Kagami did not bother with any clichéd thoughts about this being how a true parent should act.

For the first time, the woman had simply protected her daughter. Instead of helping her dodge or defend, she had simply moved to protect.

“I thank you.”

Kagami appreciated that a resident of a world she had helped create had made that decision. And...

“————”

The Headmaster began to disappear.

Ether light scattered from her feet, hands, and sides.

She had reached her limit. The light scattered from the same locations that had been missing inside the coffin the night before.

The Headmaster looked Kagami’s way and her lips moved. She was probably trying to speak, but she no longer had enough strength to produce an audible voice. She was no more than video footage now, but she still spoke.

“I leave this to you too.”

There was no point in asking what. Kagami had been left with many things in the past.

So she nodded and the Headmaster looked behind her.

“Mama!”

The girl there was weak in the knees and she simply reached her hands out.

Fleur tried to keep her mother here.

She tried to hold her in her arms and to keep it all from leaking out.

But she could not.

Her arms swung through empty air and her hands passed through the pieces of her mother that scattered into the sky.

“Ah, ah...!”

She stretched her hands out toward the scattering light and tried to gather it all together, but it was no use. Everything strayed from what she intended and it all vanished.

Her arms only found herself to hold as she shook her head over and over.

“Mama!”

As she yelled, her mother vanished with a smile.

Her mother had smiled, but she was nowhere to be found now. Fleur looked left, right, forward, back, up, and everywhere her spell circle would show her, but she could not find her mother anywhere. She looked around and around, refusing to accept what had happened.

“No...!”

She shouted. She raised her voice toward the sky.

“Why...!? You promised...!”

Several lights appeared around her. She could no longer control the Magino Device, so the power was running out of control. But that did not matter.

“Come back...!”

She simply raised her right hand and 3 main cannon spell circles opened at once.

She could do that. She could do that and more.

But she had no one to show it off to anymore. However, she did have someone to beat down with it. So...

“I’ll be a good girl! I’ll show you I can, so come back, mama!!”

She used the 3 main cannons to sweep an attack around the top of the Zephyr for a combined total of 1080 degrees.

Fleur's Magino Device was collapsing. The armor peeled away like falling flower petals and transformed into fragments of light.

But Horinouchi saw two movements from below the half-destroyed Dikaiosyne.

The first was the scattering armor turning into flowers.

The second was main cannon beams cutting across the sky while scattering roses. Three beams of white roses raced out and pursued the Holy Knight who had jumped down from the Device.

"Kagami!"

Kagami had avoided a direct hit, but there were also aftereffects. Her Form's armor and the sword she had used as a shield had shattered.

Dikaiosyne could not move, so Horinouchi slid Akerindou out.

"Kagami...!"

She ran to the edge to catch up. To make it in time. She stretched out her hand, but Akerindou had no hand to grab with. She and Kagami needed it, so neither of them would let her throw it away.

The battle was not yet over. With that in mind, she reached out with her nearly bare right hand.

"..."

She grabbed Kagami and pulled her in.

Akerindou descended to better catch the falling girl.

"Going downwwwwwn."

When she looked back toward that voice, she saw the Suzaku clearing its throat.

"Um, was that...?"

"Horinouchi! Its owner must not question it!"

Kagami seemed to be doing well. The next thing Horinouchi knew, she was holding that girl who she could only sigh at.

...Honestly.

“I said to leave it to me if you were going to hesitate.”

“I did not hesitate. I simply saw a certain decision.”

Kagami smiled bitterly, then breathed in and looked overhead.

“We have to stop her. But...”

All of the stripped away armor was turning into flowers. And what would that lead to?

“Does she intend to destroy everything even as she loses control!?”

“Kagami! Horinouchi!”

Hunter viewed the scene through a light-amplified telescopic spell.

The wild cloud of flowers was splitting apart and gaps were forming.

But not because it was weakening. The force with which the flowers were being ejected had grown beyond anything seen previously. They had been floating as a cloud before, but now they swirled as a violent storm.

Triple main cannon shots were continually racing out and detonating the clouds they hit. They were sometimes fired toward the Pacific and detonated the ocean along a somewhat twisted arc.

And the fleet began to move.

“All ships, approach to 50 km off Japan’s east coast! ...We must move below the angle of fire!”

The deck rocked below Hunter’s feet as the acceleration lifted the bow and pulled down the stern.

...We’re all gonna die together here.

Hunter had something to do, so she contacted the command center with a communication spell.

“Captain! And Lieutenant! If we get closer, we can get more detailed data, right!? Send that to the Horinouchi family! And to the Rank 3 at Shihouin

Academy!”

Mary understood what she had to do.

...I need to read the currents of these storm clouds!

She could freely control invisible annihilation scythes, so she could easily read currents of power. Of course, those currents grew complex with as many layers to the power as seen here. But...

“My teacher easily read and emulated the way that girl moves.”

She had suddenly done it in the middle of battle, so she was a monster. Mary was normal compared to that, but...

“All done!”

She was skilled at reading multiple layers. Her training allowed her to draw it all out as actual skill. Her teacher had seen that inside her. So...

“I need to send them this information!”

Horinouchi received simulation data of the surrounding clouds courtesy of Koutarou. She had the Suzaku eat it while she focused on firing.

But the collapsing armor was getting in the way. Even when she fired, the armor would self-destruct like sand and the force of the blow would not get through. And the chips of destroyed armor panels became flowers and rained down on them.

“Kh...!!”

Explosions fell like a waterfall and tore into Akerindou.

Kagami was next to her.

“Dikaio, can you pull yourself back up?”

The dragon child shook its head at that. Defending against the previous hits had to have taken nerves of steel, but that servant was a sturdy child despite its appearance.

...Letting her go was the right decision.

But even as they fired and detonated the flowers to secure a safe zone...

...How long is this going to continue!?

As she asked that, Horinouchi heard a voice in the sky.

It was Fleur. The girl was crying alone atop her collapsing Magino Device.

“Mama! Where are you!? Where did you go!? Weren’t we supposed to be together forever!? Mama! I’ll be a good girl and I won’t do anything else you need to scold me for, so come back, Mama!”

She had not done anything wrong, so why had her mother gone away?

“Was I not a good girl? Then I’ll be one! I will! I really will!”

Her mother had often told her she was a good girl and that she would get stronger.

And yet her mother had gone away.

“It was you two! It was you two that made mama go away!”

Her Magino Device’s sight devices showed her the opponents hiding in the broken parts of Zephyr.

“Give back mama!”

She controlled her Magino Device. She had power. Her mother had wanted her to be powerful. So she used that power as if grabbing the giant Device in her hand and moving it.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

If she pulled it hard to the west, the enemy could not follow.

She slid the 3 km wide Device through the sky.

And she saw it. In the swirling blizzard of flowers in the eastern sky, a small bow-shaped Device floated while facing the moon. It could not keep up with her and simply aimed toward heaven.

If she destroyed that, it was over. And once it was over, it would be

Hexennacht, just like she had promised with her mama.

Her mama would keep her promise, so the rest was simple. She would use the main cannon spell circle opened overhead to make a main cannon attack.

“Wait for me, mama! I’ll be there soon! I’ll keep my promise! So...!”

She fired the main cannon at full power.

This was not a sweeping attack. It was a straight line.

Horinouchi sensed danger.

...I was too slow to respond!

No matter what happened, she had never imagined a 3 km wide Magino Device could move so suddenly.

Akerindou was exposed to their opponent while pointing straight up. In that position, it would be nearly impossible to dodge left or right. And since it was focused on firing, the thrusters were set to maintain its position, meaning it could not immediately ascend.

That left only one option.

“Kagami! I’ll endure this with multiple layers of 3-arrow barriers! But...”

Kagami’s Dikaiosyne had been almost entirely destroyed, but it was slowly falling toward the surface. So Horinouchi was going to tell her to evacuate onto that.

But a strength stopped her.

Kagami powerfully grabbed her shoulder and pulled her close.

Triple main cannon blasts were arriving from beyond Akerindou and the light was approaching head-on, but Kagami raised her eyebrows in a smile and squeezed Horinouchi’s shoulder.

“It all comes down to this.”

And...

“Horinouchi. ...What form do you imagine could defeat and admonish that

opponent?”

“Well...”

Just as Horinouchi wondered what this girl was talking about, the rose main cannon struck Akerindou.

“A hard hit!?”

Hunter saw a massive ether explosion inside the battlefield’s air currents.

Those were clearly the fragments of a Magino Device’s destruction. And that led to only one conclusion: “Did they lose!?”

Dikaiosyne had sunk down out of view. It had already been destroyed. And now Akerindou and its excellent attack power had been destroyed. So...

“Damn!”

“Hunter!”

She shook when she heard the second-in-command, Song Café, suddenly shout her name.

And then warning spell circles appeared all across the deck and the other ships.

...Huh!?

Hunter quickly looked around and saw all of the ships advancing in alert mode. That meant there was something considered dangerous at their destination. But even if Fleur’s out-of-control Device was clearly dangerous, they already had all the data on it. So...

“Hunter! Look carefully out ahead! Our control system has detected something large enough to trigger an alert!”

“Something large...!?”

“We don’t know! We can’t identify it at all! It’s a new model! And-...”

It appeared before Song Café could finish speaking.

The ether explosion smoke of Akerindou's destruction had created a glowing cumulonimbus cloud and two wings stretched toward the night sky from within it.

The wings broke through the clouds and reached a height of more than 5 kilometers in the sky.

"...Ah?"

Dumbfounded, Hunter gasped as she ignored the surrounding sounds of waves, of the accelerating fleet, and of the wind.

...What is that?

Everyone else on the deck was equally speechless as it tore through the cloud to move forward.

A shrine bell and a church bell could be heard ringing together as vermillion armor and a vermillion cloak came into view.

The helmet worn deep over the eyes was decorated with wings. The weapon it held was the familiar shape of Dikaiosyne except with a vermillion color and an even greater size.



“A Holy Knight-type...?”

No, it had wings and it had a skirt and sleeves that the clouds trailed from.

It was over 3 kilometers tall. It looked like a divine idol and its name was given in a transmission from the Horinouchi family.

“This form was left in the records of Lady Mitsuru’s mother. She sublimated her Magino Frame to bring it to an even higher level.”

It was...

“Lady Mitsuru’s mother named it the Geo Frame!”

Koutarou saw it on the video footage.

He must have seen this once before, but he had forgotten.

“Thank you very much, milady...”

This had overwritten the erased memories of his first master.

That divine idol resembled both Kagami and Horinouchi.

The trick behind it had to be Dikaiosyne. The Magino Device had collapsed and fallen, but it had not been completely destroyed. And the giant Device's collapse had produced a massive amount of ether.

Dikaiosyne had stored that and given it to Kagami.

The rest was Horinouchi's job. A Shinto shrine maiden was defined by her connection to her god. The image she had wished for resembled Kagami's Holy Knight, but that may have been due to the Halloween party the other day.

"Well done, milady!"

Horinouchi felt like she knew this.

...No, I do know it.

She and Kagami controlled it from a deck-like platform atop the chest.

"The Geo Frame..."

She and Kagami had worked together to create this Device. The dragon child and the Suzaku both produced their own spell circle and both of them displayed the view from the giant divine idol's eyes.

She realized their Forms had changed as well. They had feathered decorations, a cloak, sleeves, and side skirts, so it seemed a little too Western for a Shinto shrine maiden.

But, she thought.

...This is the "power" I pictured in my mind.

She did not deny that. And there was a large flower in front of them. They would reach it in another 5 seconds. So...

"Let's do this, Kagami!"

"Yes, Horinouchi. What should we call this?"

She realized her Akerindou had inherited its name, so she had never named a weapon. So...

“I’m not sure, so I’ll leave that to you.”

“Then how about the Hyper Manko!? Attack, Ultra Manko!”

The idol stopped moving.

“Y-you idiot! You just hurt its feelings!”

“No, I believe it is only responding to your own excitement.”

Honestly, she thought as she caught her breath. The idol began moving once more.

...Ah.

The air currents triggered a chain reaction of explosions. Fleur had instructed all of the flowers to detonate in order to destroy them.

Mary saw the spell circle’s footage white out from the large scale ether explosion.

To the north, white light raced high in the sky and shimmering heat covered the surface of the night sky. The air pushed away from the northern battlefield by the explosion had reached her on a large enough scale to distort the environment.

And she could see it with the naked eye now.

She saw it far north of the destroyed buildings on the northern coast of Tokyo Bay.

“That’s it...”

The goddess idol broke through the light and smoke of the explosion and took a step forward.

It was unharmed.

...Is that the Shinto power of purification?

She was certain that a shrine bell could be heard ringing on the battlefield every time it moved.

And the idol slowly but lightly stepped forward.

“Impossible...!”

Fleur saw an unbelievable power approaching her.

...Impossible!

“Mama never told me about that! Don’t you think using that is rude to mama!? Don’t you think it’s unfair!?”

She slammed the flowers against it and fired volleys from her secondary cannons.

But none of it could even scratch the great sword held up as a shield.

“Mama! I’ll keep my promise!”

She cried out and swung both arms forward.

She swung a triple main cannon blast down like a sword raised overhead.

It was settled by a single attack.

The idol raised its great sword overhead and launched a counterattack.

The high speed slash struck the triple rose spears that swung down like a whip from heaven.

“We will stop you!”

Shrine and cathedral bells rang in unison as the blade sliced right through the three lines of roses.

The roses scattered and the light split. The great sword’s blade alone was more than 4 kilometers long.

That vermilion sword split the great flower.

It was split from top to bottom and the idol’s follow through motion brought the blade all the way down to the ground.

“—————”

The idol turned its back on the great flower that still floated in the sky.

It stood tall and stabbed its sword into the ground.

At that very moment, the two halves of the collapsing flower Device shifted slightly, one half up and one half down.

The self-destruction was instantaneous. Instead of exploding, everything turned to flower petals and scattered into the air.

The air shook with a wave-like sound.

The sound of rustling leaves reverberated through the sky.

Then all of the flowers burst and spread across the sky like one giant blooming flower.

From there, it all became fragments of light that decorated the air.

It had been destroyed.

At some point, the sky had gained a faint light.

The battle was over and dawn was breaking.

Chapter 15: What I Want To Convey

第十五章

『伝えたいこと』



今思えば
それは未明の前の
星空と同じだった

Thinking back

That was the same as

The starry sky before dawn

Horinouchi and Kagami descended to the ground in the early dawn.

This place had been a battlefield not long before.

A plain continued as far as the eye could see and the Nasu Highland and the mountains could be seen beyond a horizon that showed the curvature of the Earth.

It was quiet.

US F-23s flew in wide arcs overhead to protect them. The low rumbling of shockwaves reached their ears, so the battlefield must have contained some considerable decibels for this to seem quiet.

Hunter and the Americans had performed an inspection out at sea and had concluded none of the explosive spells remained.

The European U.A.H. Magino Devices were still visible in the western sky, but they were not approaching. Horinouchi and Kagami had already dispelled the Geo Frame and had returned to their normal uniforms.

They would likely return to the academy in a Japanese U.A.H. helicopter arranged by Koutarou.

...How am I supposed to handle all this once I get back?

Horinouchi would have to give an explanation to U.A.H. and provide a response for the Horinouchi family. Even if she left all that to Koutarou and fled into the school, she was being treated like a celebrity lately and the newspaper club and PR Committee would never leave her alone. And since she was the Student Council President, they had the perfect excuse to approach her. But something else was important at the moment:

“Fleur.”

It was not their first time meeting, but she was unsure if she should use her

given name like that.

Nevertheless, she called out to the weeping girl who was sitting in the dark field.

Part of Horinouchi thought this was the arrogance of victory, but...

“Ah...”

As soon as the crying face spotted her, the girl stood up.

She had realized these two were the opponents she had fought during the battle.

Horinouchi let Fleur weakly walk over.

She took 11 steps. That brought her to Horinouchi, but she ended it with what amounted to a tackle.

“You two...!”

She clung to Horinouchi and hit her. She pushed with her entire body, telling Horinouchi to stand back.

She was saying she refused to accept it. She wanted to say that the other two girls, the previous battle, and the circumstances she found herself in were lies and impossible, so she pushed back, trying to defeat them.

...Yes.

Horinouchi accepted those thoughts. She took a light step back and looked at Fleur while sensing her heat.

Kagami started to provide support from the side, but Horinouchi stopped her with a hand.

She simply listened to Fleur.

“Mama...! Mama went away...!”

She knew what the girl was saying.

“Give her back! Give her back!!”

She understood.

“Why...?”

She really did understand. Fleur had not been ignorant of her mother’s situation. But she had refused to accept the inevitable future, created certain conditions she could use as an excuse, and clung to them.

And Horinouchi understood how this girl felt as she sobbed, grabbed at her collar, and yet buried her face in her chest.

Horinouchi had once been the same. So...

“————”

She held the girl in her arms. The girl’s small shoulders shook.

“Stop...!”

She would not stop. She would not let go even if the girl struggled.

“Stop! If you do this, mama will go away!”

Yes. This was the arrogance of victory. If the loser accepted it, it would mean accepting what she had lost.

Horinouchi would not tell this girl to feel the same way she had in the past. But...

“Stop...!”

She looked at the teary face looking up at her.

She looked at it through her vision which had grown blurry at some point.

Fleur tried to blame the other girl. She tried to call this unfair, she tried to tell her to stop, and she tried to say she refused to accept this.

But when she looked up, she saw something.

The girl holding her was crying.

For some reason, Fleur felt like there was a smile on her own face.

That feeling brought a sense of shame.

“Wh-what are you doing!? Your tears of sympathy aren’t going to-...”

“No,” said the girl. “That isn’t what this is.”

Horinouchi understood now.

She recalled the past and the events on the sunset pier after her battle with Kagami.

“This is not sympathy.”

She continued to cry, but strength filled her eyebrows as she spoke to Fleur.

“Your mother, who was also our savior, has been lost. That and the fact that you are sad are making me sad.”

Yes.

This was not sympathy. It came from her care for the target of the other girl’s sorrow.

And so she wept.

She now understood why Kagami had cried back then.

Would this girl in her arms understand one day?

And...

“Hey, Horinouchi, Fleur.”

Kagami called to them, so Horinouchi looked back and saw a certain sight.

The surrounding land was being illuminated by the rising sun. The white sunlight was level with them, but it soon rose to an angle and lit up the field in which they stood. And as that light filled it...

“Flowers...”

Hearing Fleur’s voice, Horinouchi let her go. That small body stretched up on her toes to see the entire scene.

She was simply not tall enough for that. After all, what they saw continued beyond the horizon.

“A flower garden?”

“The Lady Headmaster apparently sowed divinely protected flower seeds here as part of the recovery work. ...As she chose this place for the battlefield, Fleur, she must have wanted you to see this no matter how the battle turned out.”

Kagami asked Fleur a question.

“Do you perhaps sense your mother here?”

Fleur looked back with tears in her eyes. But instead of answering, she wiped away the tears, turned her back on the other girls, ran a few steps forward, took a heavy breath to catch her breath, and...

“Mama!!”

Fleur yelled to the earth and the air.

“I...I...!”

That was as far as she got. She covered her face with her hands, raised her voice again, and wept.

But this time it was not to resist or accuse; it was to rid herself of her anger.

...That’s right.

Horinouchi had once cried like that. If no amount of resistance and accusation would change anything, then crying your eyes out was the only option. And once you grew sick of crying, you would stand back up.

She wondered what her mother would think of her past self and her present self, and then...

...Oh?

Perhaps because of the flowers’ divine protections, a wind carrying ether light whipped up around them and then moved in next to Fleur.

“Headmaster...”

For a brief moment, Horinouchi could have sworn she saw the woman there: smiling, holding weeping Fleur’s shoulders, and nodding toward Horinouchi.

...Ah.

The woman flew up toward the rising sun and toward heaven. She left the

flowery earth and vanished.

Or perhaps Horinouchi only imagined it.

Final Chapter: That is a Small Light

最終章

『それは小さな光』



まあ何だ
季節は回るさ

Well, you know

The seasons change

The Ranker Battle ended and a week passed.

Lisbeth had rethought why she had come to Japan.

She had originally come as a representative of European U.A.H., but on the day after the Ranker Battle, U.A.H. had left and she had taken over as Shihouin Academy's headmaster. U.A.H. had protested this, but after some pressure from American U.A.H., she was accepted as a special adviser from European U.A.H.

She had a lot to do. Not only did they have to prepare for Hexennacht, but every country around the world was boiling with excitement over the concept of the Geo Frame. The presence of Kagami Kagami as "the Black Witch's sister" drew people's attention both positively and negatively and she could only smile coldly when no one could decide whether the girl should be given an inquiry or an interview. As she kicked out all requests for Kagami to visit another country or the mass media, Lisbeth realized just how right she and Cerisier had been to create Shihouin Academy.

...We were much the same back then.

The Horinouchi family had worked well for Mitsuyo, so Lisbeth felt an obligation to protect Mitsuyo's heir in the same way. But...

"This way, Fleur."

She had an important job today.

Fleur had come to school for the first time in a while and she had said she wanted to visit the mausoleum.

Lisbeth guided silent Fleur down to the end of the corridor and pulled out her card key.

"You take this, hold it out like this...and it opens."

Will that surprise her? she silently wondered, but the girl seemed too focused

on holding something inside.

Well, that doesn't matter, decided Lisbeth as she opened the door and looked within.

It was a dark space illuminated only by the installed lights. But there was one thing illuminated by the central coffin's lights: a flower dragon.

It was pink and it noticed them.

“————”

Oh? thought Lisbeth as it passed between her and Fleur and ran off.

A flower dragon was a powerful type of servant, but she had no obligation to capture it. If it had lost its master, it would find someone else for a symbiotic relationship.

...And I suppose this girl is the same.

Lisbeth looked to Fleur next to her.

A great change had occurred in that girl.

...She can't use even the simplest of spells.

She had not lost her ability to control ether. She simply no longer knew what to do with it.

Her combination with her mother had likely been too perfect. For better or for worse, Cerisier had guided Fleur's actions.

Simply put, she lacked the methods, but she still had the ability. If she was eventually given the chance, she would likely return to normal. After all, an investigation had found her ether control and ether extraction abilities were far greater than Lisbeth's own. That colossal Device and its attacks had used the ether she drew out as its foundation and Cerisier had only lent a hand in controlling it.

And when she stepped inside the hall full of withered plants...

“————”

Fleur ran over to the coffin in the center. Her feet sounded light on the plants and she knelt down next to the coffin.

Her mother slept there.

“Mama.”

That familiar cry contained a tremor.

“You were here the whole time, weren’t you?”

Yes, thought Lisbeth. *She is saying goodbye to her mother.*

She had used the past tense. By seeing this unmoving form, she engraved in her heart that this precious person was someone who had already left and would move no more.

“Lisbeth.”

“What is it?”

“Can I stay at this school?”

“I have no intention of letting a promising witch leave.”

“I was a bad girl.”

“You were,” agreed Lisbeth. “You took the most convenient interpretation of what your mother said, you indulged in that, and you simply relied on her without doing anything yourself.”

But...

“Cerisier would not have traded that time for anything. ...I can only say I feel bad for her since only we get to see you become a good girl.”

“Then...”

“Tell me when you grow tired of being a student. I will make you headmaster. It is a simple job. ...You only have to plant flowers in the wasteland.”

“I see,” replied the girl’s small back as she hung her head, let her shoulders shake, and yet noticed something.

“What is it?”

“Mama is...smiling.”

Was she? Had rigor mortis set in even within the preservation spell? But when Lisbeth had seen her the night before, there had been no smile on her face. If

there was...

...You...

The records of that battle said that Cerisier had met her ultimate end while trying to protect her daughter.

That was what she had originally wanted. That was what Lisbeth had asked her about that night.

...Did you hear me?

Lisbeth noticed a small light at her feet.

It came from the plants.

That was where the flower dragon had been. That servant had likely stayed there protecting the last remnant of its master's soul.

That old friend's soul had not been lost.

"I see."

Lisbeth noticed heat on her cheeks below her eyes.

"Hexennacht."

On the way here, the 2 who had become the Rank 1 and the other 2 had been fighting over food and shouting something about a celebration party up on the cafeteria terrace. Part of Lisbeth had been exasperated, but another part of her...

...Yes.

She and her friends had been the same. Cerisier meant "cherry blossom". And that spring flower had finally withered.

But the autumn flowers were waiting to bloom.

Flower gardens were best when they were busy. Noisiness was its own sort of beauty.

"Lisbeth."



——約束を守るよ。

“What is it?”

“When mama and that shrine maiden’s mother...decided who would be the representative, why were they fighting?” asked Fleur. “The Ranker Battle system didn’t exist back then, right?”

“Correct,” confirmed Lisbeth.

A colossal Device and a Geo Frame had been summoned 10 years before. And the reason behind that battle was frightening indeed.

“They were fighting over the 8 PM TV channel.”

Fleur looked back and forth between Lisbeth and her mother with a look of disbelief on her face, but, well, that happened a lot.

—I will keep my promise.

Afterword

That was Clash of Hexennacht III. I felt like I had to have a character with a flower motif if I was doing magical girls. But what do I know about doing what's normal when I've already put in a karate fighter and an executioner?

When I looked into it, there seemed to be both a lot and very few motifs for magical girls. They of course have to be "girls", so there are some standard motifs and color schemes. I did a lot of studying there.

But the most frightening thing is how hard drawing them becomes if you get too obsessed with all their decorations, so it's difficult getting the balance just right.

Tsurugi-san is putting in a lot of work on the manga version that is being released in parallel. I believe this volume is being released alongside the 3rd manga volume which features the end of the Mary arc. You can see a smug Manko among other things, so I recommend picking it up.

Anyway, this volume had a lot happening in Nasu, but I used to go skiing around there a lot. There was a period of several years where they didn't get much snow and I couldn't go, but I have to wonder if the restaurants on the way still have "beef bowls" that clearly use lamb or bentos that have curry in them for some odd reason. That really takes me back.

Now for the chat.

"You can talk about magical girls."

"I will always be suspicious of those pervy creatures that hang out with them."

"So we're starting with distrust, are we? And don't call them pervy. They take it all very seriously...probably."

"But what counts as a magical girl and what doesn't? Do they just need one of those pervy creatures with them? That would make Kiki's mom a magical girl!

This is great. We're really in the zone now!"

"Shut up. And there are some that clearly don't have a pervy creature. Like when they have a supervisor."

"A supervisor pervy creature!"

"Get your mind off of pervy creatures. And sometimes a guy has a pervy creature. And I don't mean that as a euphemism. ...Maybe it's the title? But then Hana no Ko *nn* wouldn't qualify. So much for that."

"Don't ask me to talk about something and then say never mind!"

I didn't say the conversation was over. Well, whatever. My work background music this time was *Outride a Crisis* from *Super Hang On*. That song really makes me picture the moment of dawn, so I always chose it.

But this time I'll leave you with the question "Who remained the most reliant?" Next will be a *Horizon Girls Talk*, but there's also the *smartphone Obstacle* reboot, so things should be busy.

June 2016. A really hot morning.

-Kawakami Minoru

Gekitotsu no Hexennacht - Volume 03

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